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Texas Western

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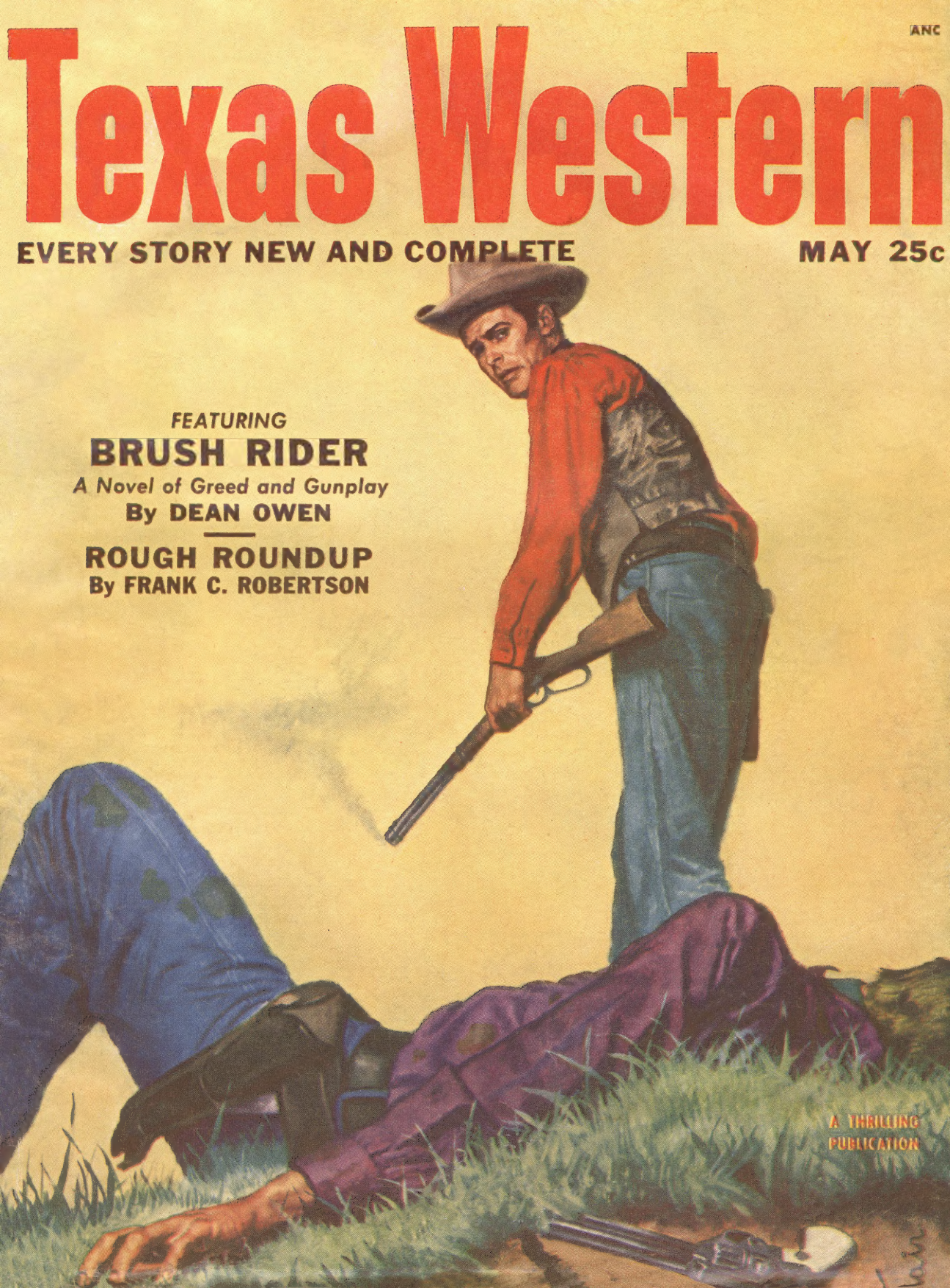


FEATURING

BRUSH RIDER

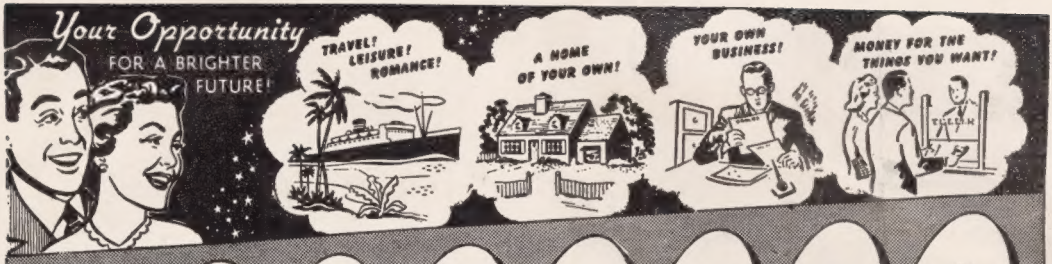
A Novel of Greed and Gunplay

By DEAN OWEN

ROUGH ROUNDUP

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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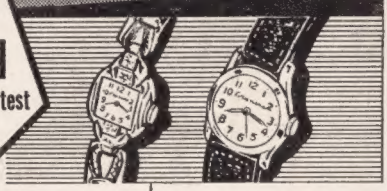

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See Sample Puzzle at Upper Right!

This contest consists of puzzles like the SAMPLE PUZZLE above. Note how we filled it in . . . how we identified the objects and found that certain letters in the names of the objects stood out from the rest, thus to spell out the name of the famous person pictured at the bottom. Read the explanation carefully.

Note how we identified each object with a word of as many letters as there are boxes in diagram accompanying it. In upper left we filled in word SHOE; in upper right, TIE. In lower left, TIGER; in lower right, PURSE. Note that some of the letters fell into boxes with a little circular frame inside. Those "circled" letters, arranged into proper order, spell out the famous name we are looking for.

Here, for example, the "circled" letters are H T R U. So we run through the names printed under the puzzle and discover Babe RUTH, whose last name is the correct solution, and whose picture you see at bottom.

SAMPLE PUZZLE

Solution is One of the Names Below:

Zane GREY — Henry CLAY
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EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Texas Western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION VOL. 1, NO. 3 MAY, 1953

COMPLETE NOVEL

BRUSH RIDER . . . . . **Dean Owen** **10**

The Texas widow and the handsome stranger created more troubles for Galvan than the sharpest thorns in the brasada or the goring horns of the maddened wild ladino cattle

A NOVELET

ROUGH ROUNDUP . . . . . **Frank C. Robertson** **78**

A body in the mud, an Indian father thirsting for vengeance and seventy quick-triggered suspects, hungry for trouble . . .

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When a showdown comes, attack is the best defense

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SUNDOWN . . . . . **Ellis Sloan** **108**

A son needs a father, and a father needs a son. . .

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Beef bandits ran rampant

along the cattle trails

from Texas to the North

Frontier Rustlers

CATTLE thieves have stalked across the pages of the early West for decades, yet there are a lot of details concerned with mass cattle-thievery that are not too well known.

Take, for instance, the "Texas fever" racket. To understand why cattle owners put up with it and ran the risk of encountering it, you have to review the background of the great drives that came up from Texas. Big ranch-owners were virtually compelled to market their beef up North.

The Civil War almost bankrupted some cattlemen. Beef was in great demand during and after the war. Prices in the North were high and firm. But, in the South (and parts of Texas), the huge herds could not be delivered into the old Southern markets. Some ranchers succeeded in swimming cattle across the Mississippi into Vicksburg, running the partial blockade established by Union gunboats. Even after the war, there was a vicious transportation monopoly in the South. The Morgan line of gulf steamboats exacted abnormally high rates. New Orleans and Mobile were practically the only major markets that could be reached.

So the great herds were forced to drive northward—and run the gamut of the cattle-gangsters.

Up North, there were two possible markets. First, the "moving population," reaching across the Mississippi River, westward. They included the lively Army market—beef for the Federal forces patrolling the untamed West; the newly-arrived settlers; and men employed in sizeable construction projects—like railroads, bridges, forts, etc. Secondly, it was the railroad-terminal buyers who bought herds and shipped them back East to the mass market. These terminals were usually at the westernmost extension of the new Pacific-bound railways. Abilene, Salina and others, in Kansas; Ogallala, North Platte and similar junctions in Nebraska. These were the targets of the cattle drives

"Texas fever" was the virulent infection that ran through Southern herds. Northern cattlemen feared it. It could ruin a herd in a hurry.

Eventually, a form of temporary quarantine (like the Ellis Island procedure for human immigrants) was worked out. But, prior to that, outlaw gangs—under the pretext of "protecting" Northern herds—would pounce on great up-coming herds when they reached the southern boundaries of Kansas and Missouri. They would beat and humiliate the herdsmen; even kill them. Many were lashed to lonely trees. Then the herds were stampeded, after the choicest critters were cut out. Or, after the whole herd was stolen. At any rate, nothing but "premium" disease-free stock was marketed by the hijackers.

Another racket was to stalk the herd at night, start a stampede, and funnel a part of the frightened cattle into a pre-arranged canyon "corral." The outlaws would appear, at daybreak, at the herdsmen's camp and offer their services to "hunt down and round-up" the stampeded stock. At so much per head. They would then deliver the corralled critters and collect.

This form of outlawry was inadvertently strengthened when Kansas passed a law prohibiting the entry of Texas longhorns—except under certain conditions. This meant herdsmen had to seek new routes each trip.

In the Wyoming and Montana country, there was a crooked political setup. It all started with an old ranch custom. This was the giving of a few head of cattle to favorite cowpokes on the ranches. They would then raise and sell—or swap—these few head.

Less trustworthy cow-hands saw an opportunity here. During the seasonal round-ups, a few mavericks naturally escaped the branding iron, and drifted back. On the far side of the ranch, these cowboys would gather up and brand these mavericks, to

match the brand of their own small herd.

It was necessary to register a brand with the county clerk to establish a rancher's right thereto. These county officers were being constantly warned not to register any brand that looked the least bit shady. Especially if the brand mark was closely similar to another.

Fast-dealing cowhands would bribe county clerks and establish a "hot" brand symbol. Using their own few head as a shield, they would rustle, brand and sell their "surplus" to some fence-like cattle buyer.

To combat this type of thievery, the cattlemen's associations passed resolutions not to hire any ranch-hands owning or running cattle of their own. Each association maintained a blacklist of suspect men. Ranchers were forbidden to hire these cowpokes. The penalty was blackballing the rancher at roundup and maverick-sales activities.

Still clamping down, the associations established inspectors at major markets to check brands. They were on hand at Miles City, St. Paul, Chicago, Clinton, Council Bluffs, Pacific Junction, Laramie, North Platte; at other railroad loading points—including the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Indian reservations.

On November 8, 1883, the Wyoming associations declared that "all rustler brands and stray brands, having no known owners, were to be treated as mavericks." However, the associations had the power to determine which brands were officially maverick. Actually, this was an invasion of constitutional rights of ranchmen, since all suspected owners had to prove their innocence according to the judgment of the association to recover their lawfully-owned strays. It set up a perfect working background for certain forms of livestock hijacking.

Finally, the state passed a maverick law to get out of the jam.

For the same reasons, Montana passed a state tax-supported inspection service, supported by a two-mill levy not only on cattle, but also on horses and mules. Soon other states had to make similar provisions.

Complicating the enforcement of anti-rustling laws was the natural repugnance with which some smaller communities greeted the overlording cattle barons. Often it was hard to get convictions on thieves, despite the high-priced legal talent imported by the associations. In desperation, cattle barons, in 1884, hired bands of armed men to track down and hang cattle rustlers.

It was only when the far-flung ranges became a part of newly-organized state governments that the conditions permitting hijacking of livestock faded away.

—*K. D. Curtis*

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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SIXGUN LORE

Name your favorite lead-poison thrower!

THE men at the Bar-H ranch knew the time had come for the showdown. Bill Evans was facing the man he hated most in this world—Jim Ridley. With lightning speed Bill went for the sixgun in his holster. What was the make of that gun? Was it a Colt Frontier six-shooter? Maybe it was a Remington. Or was it a Schofield Smith & Wesson? It might even have been a Merwin Hulbert. Perhaps our hero was so tired of having villains killed with a Colt that he even used a Forehand & Wadsworth.

The fact is that the Colt had competitors and many a cowboy or lawman had his own reasons for the gun he carried. The favorite weapon of Billy the Kid was the Colt Lightning revolver, because this revolver fitted well into his small hand, better than the large gripped Peacemaker.

When Frank James surrendered to Governor Crittenden, the outlaw handed his revolver and cartridge belt to the man who was determined to get rid of the James boys. Some person asked Frank why he carried a Remington and he replied, "Because the Remington is the hardest and surest shooting pistol made, and because it carries exactly the same cartridge as the Winchester rifle does. My armament was two Remingtons and a Winchester rifle. The cartridge of one filled the chamber of the other. You can see why I prefer Remington. There is no confusion of ammunition here. When a man gets into a close, hot fight with a dozen men shooting at him, he must have his ammunition all of the same kind."

Back in the days when Jeff Milton joined the Texas Rangers, the regulation guns were the .44 Winchester carbine and the .45 Colt six-shooter. When a recruit joined, the State of Texas was liberal. It gave him a hundred shells and then each month he received twelve rifle and six pistol shells. Jeff came across a beautifully mounted .44 pistol and the idea struck him that it would be very efficient to have a pistol and rifle using the same shells.

After the first shot, he could hardly cock the gun, and after some more shots, the cylinder no longer revolved. So he managed to trade the .44 that didn't work for a .45 that shot straight.

When you study the evolution of the various revolvers, you will find the Colt was the leader and outstanding example, and that among the Colts, the Peacemaker was the favorite. From the viewpoint of the cowboy, the gun that was best suited for his various activities, either shooting at animals or human beings, was the revolver. When dismounted, it was the weapon that could be most efficiently carried. Contrary to popular opinion, in the hands of the U. S. cavalry, the usual weapon was the six-shooter and not the saber.

Though Mr. Colt deserves lots of credit for producing a multifire gun, he was not the first to get the idea of a revolving chamber. One of the early pioneers in this field was Elisha Haydon Collier, a Bostonian, who invented a revolving flintlock pistol. It had a hand turning cylinder with a self-priming device on the lock. Poor Collier received little encouragement in this country so he went to England. With the aid of the famous English gunsmith, Nock, he actually produced some of his guns but quit because of lack of funds.

Perhaps it really makes little difference what gun our hero had in his holster, provided it didn't miss fire when his life was in danger.

—Roger Olson

Kephart was shooting at the fallen figure

MIKE GALVAN was just emerging from the brasada when he saw the three strange riders on the Alto road. He pulled up, aware that they were staring at a bunch of two-year-olds in the Ellender Angle Iron brand. The obvious leader of the trio, a handsome man wearing a wrinkled brown suit and a narrow-brimmed hat, said, "How many do you figure in this bunch, Mart?"

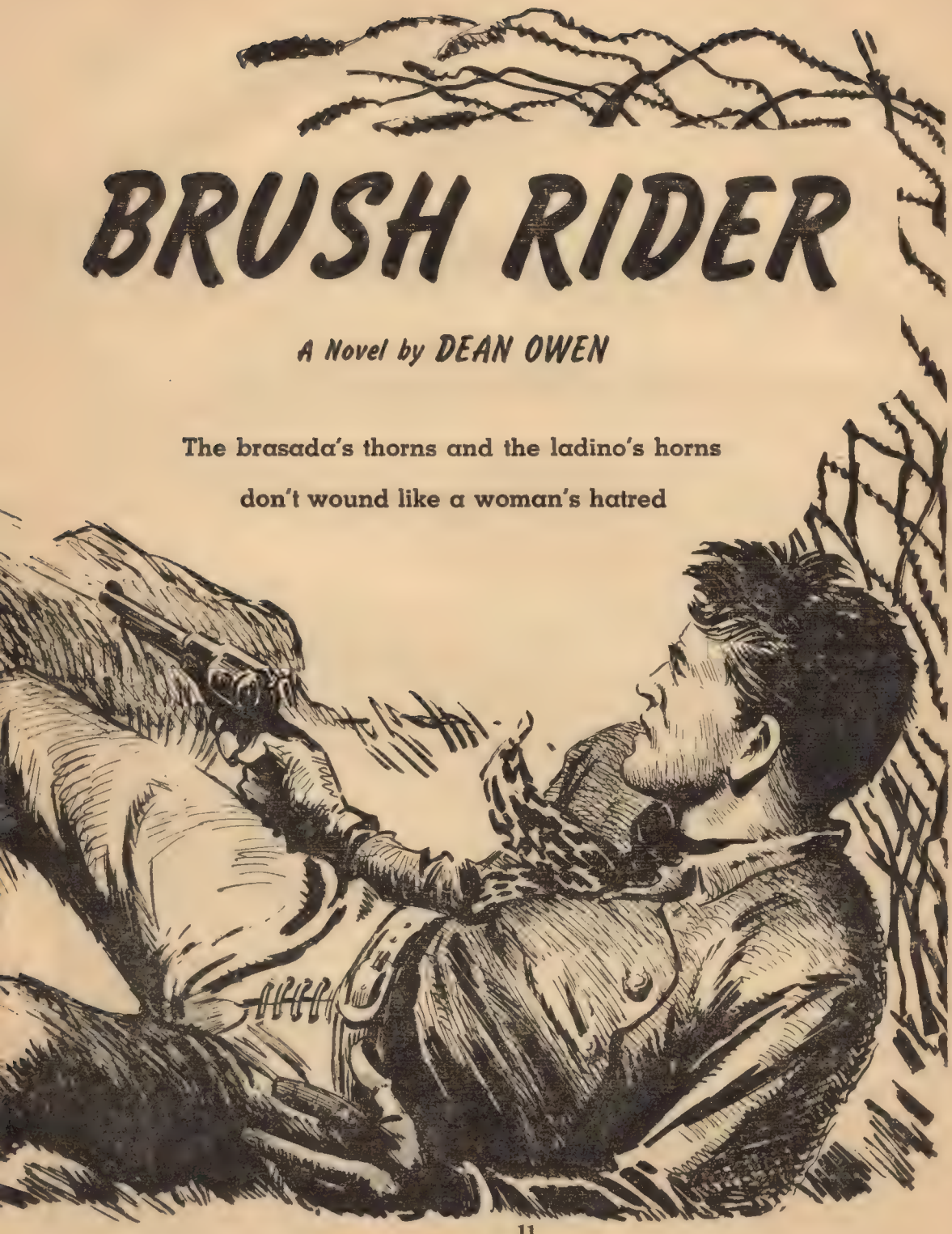
"Eight hundred, give or take a few." The man called Mart was bigger than either of his compan-

BRUSH RIDER

A Novel by **DEAN OWEN**

The brasada's thorns and the ladino's horns

don't wound like a woman's hatred



ions and, Galvan judged, would stand six inches over six feet with a hard and muscled two hundred and forty pounds to go with it. "Looks like prime stuff, Kephart."

The man addressed as Kephart made some notations on a piece of paper, crooking a knee over the saddlehorn and using his thigh for a writing board. "That's roughly thirty-five hundred head we've seen so far."

The third man, Galvan saw, was an albino. White hair hung down from beneath his hat brim. "That ain't counting the stuff that's back in the brush," the man said.

"You're right there, Jody," the brown-suited Kephart agreed. "With a herd like that the Ellender woman is far from being broke."

Mike Galvan urged his horse out of the brush and onto the road where the three riders had pulled up. At the sound of his approach, they wheeled their horses and spread apart, acting like men who had been caught at a business they wished to keep secret.

"You were talking about the Ellender cows," Galvan drawled. He spotted the Chainlink brand on their horses, which meant they were strangers to south Texas. These were the rough years when the disillusioned and the whipped had returned after the War. Even though Appomattox was a dozen years back, old hatreds persisted.

"We were admiring Mrs. Ellender's cattle," the brown-suited man said, "if it's any of your business."

"It's my business," Galvan stated flatly.

THE ALBINO was young and his pale eyes showed a liking for trouble. The big man called Mart and the albino wore guns at their belts. The brown-suited Kephart probably had one under his coat. Galvan knew they were not familiar with this country, for a man did not ride in the brush unless dressed for it. The albino's right pants leg was stained where a thorn had evidently caught him in the thigh. And Kephart's brown suit was torn in half a dozen places.

Galvan said, "I'm Lorene Ellender's foreman."

"No offense then," the man in the brown suit said. "I'm Burke Kephart." He had an easy smile and a lot of charm, Galvan thought. The type of man who could be smooth with a woman. Kephart introduced the albino as Jody Oakum and the big man as Mart Rivers. Neither of them acknowledged the introduction.

Galvan sat his saddle, right hand loose above the revolver at his belt. The wood butt was stained dark from perspiration. He was as tall as Kephart, black-haired and with light blue eyes that were a decided contrast to his dark features.

Kephart was smiling. "We're just passing through. Mighty fine looking cows in the Ellender Angle Iron."

"For just passing through," Galvan said, "you show an uncommon knowledge of brands and who owns them."

BURKE KEPHART'S eyes—they were a hard gray—studied Galvan. Galvan had the lank build of the Texan, the "to hell with it" disregard for danger. It showed in his face. His mouth was wide and he had a way of turning up one side of it, so that he seemed always to be on the verge of a grin. His brush jacket was patched and he wore bullhide chaps, so stiff they were like armor against the thorny blackbrush of the brasada.

Kephart said thinly, "Not much of a Texas welcome we're getting."

"You'll get the welcome—if you mind your own business."

The albino, Jody Oakum, swore. There was a wildness about him. His smooth face was sunburned and the skin on the bridge of his lumpy nose had peeled. He was dirty, his shirt was ripped from the brush and his denims looked as if the only time they got washed was when the wearer did some riding in the rain.

"You got a damned big tongue, cowboy," Oakum said. "I could pin it to the back of your mouth."

Mike Galvan had been relaxed in the saddle, but his right hand suddenly whipped down and up. The revolver in his hand was cocked. It did not point at Oakum, but at Burke Kephart. "Strangers who get almighty interested in a cowman's herd aren't welcome around here," Galvan warned.

Kephart, seeing the gun lined on him, said, "Easy, Jody. Don't prod this tough gent." There was a hint of mockery in his

voice, but also a thread of concern. He didn't believe for a minute that the big black-haired Galvan wouldn't shoot him. Kephart said, "What's your name, in case we ever meet again?"

"Mike Galvan. I tell you because I've got nothing to hide. But in this country you don't ask a man's name."

"Anything else?" Kephart inquired.

Galvan nodded. "I'll give you fair warning. The man we catch with a running iron in his gear, we hang."

MART RIVERS suddenly swung out of the saddle, a huge bow-legged man. "You the same as accused us of being rustlers. Put up your gun and step down."

"I'll sit where I am," Galvan said.

"Yellow," Mart Rivers muttered, and spat on the dusty ground.

"One of these days maybe I'll give you a chance to say that again," Galvan told him.

"What's the matter with now?"

Galvan gave a short laugh. "Not when your two friends can jump me. I'll fight one, but not three. Get back on that horse, Rivers."

Rivers took a hitch at his pants and boarded his roan.

Kephart's gray eyes were mildly amused. "I hear the Widow Ellender is a right pretty woman. Maybe I'll call on her and give her a true picture of the man who ramrods her ranch."

"Stay away from her," Galvan warned.

Kephart only shrugged. "How far is it to Alto?"

"Eighteen miles. But I advise you to keep moving."

"We'll give it some thought."

Galvan waited until the three men were out of sight then swung his claybank toward the Angle Iron headquarters. When he arrived Alejandro Monjosa, the horse breaker, was earing down a gelding, to make it ready for the saddle. The big Mexican grinned and Galvan lifted a hand in salute. There were no riders able to cope with the brush like vaqueros. They'd ride headlong after a steer, reckless with their own lives. Sometimes they guessed wrong and were impaled on a thorn or smashed against a mesquite when they misjudged a throw.

Galvan found Lorene under the arbor at the north end of the 'dobe house. She was dressed in cool gingham. Slender and trimly built, she wore her deep yellow hair pinned up. Three years ago Matt Ellender had gone to Chicago on business. When he came home he brought a bride.

Mike Galvan leaned against the rail that enclosed the arbor. Matt had built this arbor for Lorene because she wanted a place to sit outside and read.

Galvan rolled a cigarette with his brown fingers. "It's nice to see you out of black," he told her.

She gave him a wan smile. "It kept the gossips from talking. But it didn't help me remember Matt any better. I don't think it would have pleased him."

"I'd forgotten how pretty you are."

She seemed genuinely pleased, but he instantly regretted his statement. He had tried to keep this on an owner-foreman basis. Calling her Lorene at her insistence was a big enough concession without reminding her she was pretty.

"It was so nice of you to say that, Mike."

The book she had been reading was closed in her lap. He saw that it was by somebody named Plato.

He said, wishing to stress the business aspects of their relationship, "Bellarmine's behind in his lease payment again."

LORENE frowned, and drew her pale brows together as if in deep thought. But he knew she cared nothing for the financial side of ranching. It was only a pretext to appear to concentrate. She would frown for a moment and then tell him to do whatever he thought best.

But today she seemed vaguely disturbed. "How many years does Bellarmine owe?"

"This will make his fourth." Ruel Bellarmine, their neighbor, leased fifty sections from the Angle Iron at a rate of twelve hundred dollars a year. So far, he had paid nothing.

"I think Ruel takes advantage of my good nature," she said.

"Not intentionally."

"I'd like to be sure about that," she said firmly. "I understand he has money with which to gamble, but not to pay his just debts."

"Where did you hear that?" he asked quickly.

For a moment she made no reply, then she said, "You'll be angry with me. I went riding this morning—alone."

He felt a quick concern. South Texas in these years was not a place for a woman to ride without an escort. "You're old enough to know the chances you take," he said. "But what's that got to do with Bellarmine's gambling?"

"When I was riding I met a stranger. A very nice man, incidentally. At first I was afraid, but he was so polite—" She closed her eyes. "And the moment he learned my name he told me he was an old friend of Matt's."

Galvan watched the flush on her face. "What's this stranger's name?"

"Kephart. Burke Kephart."

Galvan looked away across the dusty yard where Monjosa was riding down the gelding, yelling and fanning the horse's head with his hat. "I don't recollect Matt ever mentioning anybody named Kephart."

"I didn't know all my husband's acquaintances. Probably you didn't either."

GALVAN frowned. She seemed determined and, he thought gloomily, she had only met this Kephart and was already defending him.

"Kephart told you Bellarmine gambles?" he asked, sensing her answer.

"He only said it was a shame that Ruel has taken advantage of me. Gambling instead of paying his just debts."

Galvan bit down a retort. "Ruel Bellarmine was Matt's best friend."

"Of course."

"And don't let anybody turn you against him. Not even Kephart."

Her eyes widened. They were blue, darker than his. She was twenty-five, two years younger than Galvan. But sometimes he felt as if there was a decade between them. She had tasted little hardship, having been orphaned only a year before Matt Ellender took her for his bride. And her parents had had money enough to give her an education, something few women save Cora Desmond, the school teacher at Alto, had been able to acquire in South Texas.

The harshness of his tone made her straighten up in the chair. "You don't

like this man Kephart?"

"No."

"You've known him a long time?" she asked.

"I just saw him once—today."

With a trembling hand she put a slip of paper in the book to mark her place. "That's not like you, Mike, to form an opinion of a man you hardly know."

He felt confused and angry. After Matt Ellender had died he had thought of pushing on, but decided he owed a loyalty to Matt's widow. That was the trouble, he told himself, of working for a woman. You could never settle issues without becoming involved in personalities. Lorene was probably defending Kephart because the man had a nice smile.

"Kephart was interested in how many cows you have, Lorene."

"That's perfectly understandable," she said, smiling a little at what she obviously considered his over-concern. "He's the representative of a west Texas cattle association and has come down here to study our methods of ranching."

Galvan was tempted to laugh, but after all, Lorene was his boss. He said dryly, "I supposed he had papers to prove he was tied up with this association."

Lorene rose, holding her book under her arm. She was slender and cool and a little disturbed at his manner. "I know little if anything about the cattle business," she told him firmly. "But I do know a gentleman when I see one."

WHEN she went into the house, Galvan crossed the yard, lifting a hand to young Guiterrez, who had recently taken himself a bride. Guiterrez had moved out of the bunkhouse to the quarters of the married men, a series of adobe buildings.

Galvan went into his quarters adjoining the bunkhouse. When Matt Ellender was living this had served as his office. Ellender had been a shrewd cowman of the old school when nerve and a running iron was all that was needed to set you up. Things had been in a mess when a year ago Ellender was stricken with smallpox. It had taken Galvan twelve months of night work to get the accounts straightened up.

Galvan threw his brush jacket over the back of a chair and turned as Luis Sanchez, his segundo, entered. The lean dark Sanchez grinned and rolled his eyes back in his head. "The boss she is pretty. No more does she mourn."

Galvan frowned. Sanchez was a romantic who believed a pretty woman needed a man and Mike Galvan was that man.

Sanchez gave him a sly smile. "Tonight I play the guitar. You take her for a walk—"

Galvan said, "You see any riders today —strangers?"

The Mexican had to stop and think, for this abrupt switch in the conversation left him confused. At his belt he wore a *cuchillo*, long bladed and with a silver hilt. Three years ago some drunken Americans had jumped him and beaten him half to death. He had scars on both cheeks, white halfmoons against his darker skin. Sanchez might not always wear a gun but he was never without his knife. Never again would they catch him without steel at his belt.

"I see *tres vaqueros*. They come down the Alto *calle*."

When Sanchez described them Galvan knew it was Kephart and his two riders. "Keep your eyes open, Luis. I don't like the looks of those boys."

"*Si, compadre*. I keep the eyes open."

Galvan washed up for supper and was just combing his thick black hair when he saw Ruel Bellarmine turn in at the yard gate. Galvan grinned and threw open the screen door and said loudly to Sanchez, who was smoking a corn husk *cigarro* in the bunkhouse doorway, "Stud poker tonight, Luis. Here's our chance to get back that eight dollars Ruel won from us."

BELLARMINE was smiling. He rode ramrod straight in the saddle, and you could never quite forget that he had been a captain with Shelby. An impoverished Southern aristocrat, he had created a turmoil in his native Mississippi when.

upon assuming control of the plantation at his father's death, he had freed his slaves. He had come to South Texas with Matt Ellender. Now he owned two sections of land, leasing his graze from Angle Iron.

"No stud tonight," Bellarmine said heavily, and slipped from the saddle. "Not unless I get some good news."

Luis Sanchez looked disappointed. He took the reins of Bellarmine's horse and led it to the tie rack.

"I need a drink, Mike," Bellarmine said. He seemed unusually quiet and somber tonight.

Galvan produced a bottle in his quarters. The whiskey put a flush on Bellarmine's aristocratic features. He had a lack of ambition, being content to drift and not worry as long as there was a dollar in his pocket. He was in his late forties; his hair was long, curling about his ears. It was gray at the temples.

"You look grim, Ruel," Galvan said, and poured another drink.

But Bellarmine did not pick up the glass. He sat on the edge of Galvan's cluttered desk without speaking or changing expression.

Galvan said, "if you're worrying about the lease money, forget it."

Ruel Bellarmine's brown eyes were serious.

"Sometimes I feel I'm not being fair to Matt's widow."

"You'll pay up one of these days," Galvan said with false heartiness. The only collateral Bellarmine possessed was a three room house and two thousand head of cows scattered to hell and gone in the brush.

"It still doesn't excuse my failure to pay honest debts." Bellarmine wore a brocaded vest. When he went calling, as tonight, he wore a black merino suit, shiny at the back and seat and mended around the pockets.

Galvin had his drink and corked the bottle.

"If Mrs. Ellender really needed the money, it would be different. But she's well fixed."

"That still doesn't excuse me," Bellarmine commented.

GALVAN felt a little sorry for Bellarmine, but he couldn't blame him for his lack of business accumen. He had been born into a wealthy family and now that he no longer had money, seemed unable to adjust himself to frontier life. Galvan knew that O'Hearn, at the Alto Saloon, held four hundred dollars in IOUs against Bellarmine. There was no telling how much else he owed. Yet he was a perfect host, served French brandy and the best bourbon whisky. He gambled when he shouldn't.

Despite his shortcomings, Galvan liked the man. And he had been Matt Ellender's friend. That counted a lot in Bellarmine's favor.

Bellarmine held the shotglass in a slender hand.

"How do you feel about Mrs. Ellender?" he asked suddenly.

Galvan was taken by surprise. "She's my boss," he said slowly. Then, to set Bellarmine straight, he added, "That's as far as it goes, Ruel."

Bellarmine smiled, and tossed off his drink. His face was flushed from an inner excitement.

"You don't find her attractive?" he inquired.

"Lorene's a pretty woman," Galvan admitted.

Bellarmine fingered a drop of bourbon from his lower lip. "You've been nice to me, Mike. You've treated me like a man when I didn't deserve it. I've been drunk and insulting—"

Galvan grinned. "You'll need some nerve, Ruel. This will help." He refilled Bellarmine's glass.

"You can guess why I came here tonight?"

"Sure. This country is no place for a single woman."

Bellarmine looked grim. "I'll make Lorene a good husband—if she'll have me."

Galvan raised his glass.

"Here's luck."

AFTER Bellarmine had gone to the main house, Galvan smoked a cigar, thinking that Lorene would be sensible to take Bellarmine for a husband. He was her type—polished, an aristocrat. They were both lonely.

He heard Lorene come to his door. "I want you to eat with us, Mike."

Galvan protested, saying he had some bookwork, for he wanted them to be alone. But because Lorene seemed gay he thought Bellarmine had already asked her. He went with her to the big dining room Matt Ellender had added onto the house for her. They ate by candlelight, Maria, the plump Mexican woman, setting out their heated plates. The conversation was light and Bellarmine, warmed by the wine, told of his youth in Natchez.

After the meal, Galvan excused himself. He went back to his quarters. Later he heard the house door slam and Lorene's voice, "Please call again, Ruel. You're welcome here any time."

Bellarmine made no reply, but his slow footfalls across the gravel yard told Galvan the story. He went outside, seeing Bellarmine standing in the shadows by the hitchrack. Lorene had closed the door; candles were being snuffed out inside.

When Galvan came up, Bellarmine gave a shaky laugh. "Want to ride to Alto?"

"Not tonight, Ruel." An uncomfortable silence ran between them while Galvan puffed on his cigar, wondering how to put into words how he really felt. Finally he said, "It takes a woman a long time to make up her mind—"

Bellarmine said sharply, "Don't soften it for me, Mike. It's over and done."

"Don't give up."

"Give up? I tell you it's finished." He swung into the saddle. "She turned me down—cold."

Galvan felt an anger that Lorene could be so blind. "She must have had a reason."

"I'm too old, she said."

"You're still young, Ruel."

"There's twenty years between us." He swung his horse and set it at a dead run down the road to Alto.

THE NEXT morning, when Galvan was assigning work to his crew, Lorene called him to the veranda. She looked cool and confident in a gray dress with a wide leather belt that Sanchez had made for her. "I wanted you to know that Ruel asked me to marry him."

"I know," Galvan said stiffly.

"He told you?"

"Only because I asked him point blank," Galvan said.

"Do you think I did a foolish thing?" She asked the question coolly, as if daring him to defy her.

"The Angle Iron needs a man," Galvan said soberly. "I was hoping it would be Ruel Bellarmine."

She seemed angry. "You'd like to marry me off, wouldn't you?"

"It's none of my business, Lorene. Let's leave it at that."

"You think I was wrong to turn him down?" she persisted.

"He was Matt's friend."

She looked at him a moment, then said, "You were also Matt's friend." She went into the house and slammed the door.

It took him some hours to reflect on her statement and he tried to twist it this way and that. He and Sanchez had taken a crew into the brush to drive out some four-year-olds that had been too long in the brasada. It was brutal work. Ramon Guiterrez was gored in the side when a ladino caught him afoot. Galvan took the injured man back to the ranch, put him in the wagon and drove to Alto. On the way to town Guiterrez nursed a bottle of tequila. He sang Mexican songs and occasionally yelled from the pain when the wagon struck a rut. The doctor, a bald little man named Withers, bound up Guiterrez's side and put him to bed.

"Any man who rides into the brush," the doctor said dolefully, "is lucky to come out alive." He was a fairly recent arrival

in the country. "Why do men risk their necks that way?" he demanded.

Galvan shrugged. "Cattle, doctor. It's their life. Do you think he'll pull through?"

"I don't know. Will you tell him to quit singing so as to conserve his strength? And take that bottle away from him."

Galvan went into the room where Guiterrez lay. "Do not sing, my friend," he said in Spanish. He reached out and took the bottle from Guiterrez's fingers. And because the bottle came easily, he stepped closer. The Mexican was dead.

Galvan came back to the waiting room, holding the bottle of tequila. His face was gray. "I'll send somebody with a coffin." He took a drink from the bottle.

The doctor looked into the room where Guiterrez lay stiffly on the bed. Then he turned to the foreman. "You're a hard one, Galvan. A man dies and you stand there and drink his tequila."

Galvan went outside.

IT WAS dark and the single block of business houses threw lamplight from the windows. He walked slowly. How many more, he asked himself. The brush was murder. He kept to the shadows, his eyes stinging. He finished the bottle and threw it into the brush. Then, half-staggering, he entered O'Hearn's Saloon.

O'Hearn, a paunchy man with a florid face, set out a bottle. "I seen you come in with the wagon. Somebody hurt?"

"Guiterrez."

"Bad?"

"We'll bury him tomorrow."

O'Hearn shook his bald head. "I'm sorry, Mike," he said and crossed himself. "How many this year?"

"Three."

"I'd hate to be responsible for sending men into the brush," O'Hearn said.

Galvan slammed a fist on the bartop. "Don't ride me, O'Hearn! Do you think I like it? Don't you think I get to hate this country sometimes?"

"Take it easy, Mike!"

"All because of some damned steers back in the brush Guiterrez has to die. A good Mexican dies just because some white-shirted poop back in New York or Boston likes beefsteak."

"We know how you feel, Mike. Don't blame yourself."

Galvan cursed and upended the bottle O'Hearn had placed on the bar. Some of the whiskey ran down the front of his shirt. There were other men in the saloon and they watched quietly.

O'Hearn said sadly, "I just remembered Guiterrez had a wife."

Galvan took off his hat and ran fingers through his black hair. "Two months ago I went to church with Guiterrez and saw him married. Now when I ride back we'll bury him and she'll cry and look at me as if I'm to blame—"

A heavy voice angled in from a corner of the saloon. "Don't worry, Galvan. A pretty Mex girl can get along. A *chica* can always make her bread at the *congale*."

Galvan turned. Seated at a rear table, playing cards with Ruel Bellarmine, was Burke Kephart. With him were the albino, Jody Oakum, and the huge Mart Rivers. Rivers was the one who had spoken. He sat with big thumbs hooked in his belt. His hat was tipped back, showing thick, dirty brick-colored hair. He was grinning.

Galvan set down the bottle. He saw Ruel Bellarmine get up from the table and stand with his back to the wall, glaring at Rivers. Bellarmine was a little drunk but he carried himself with dignity.

Rivers laughed. "Didn't you hear what I said, Galvan?"

Galvan carried the bottle across the room and stood in front of Rivers. "You don't like Mexicans," he said in a cold, emotionless voice.

Rivers was still grinning. "I wouldn't turn my back on one for five hundred in gold. But I like their women. Tell this Guiterrez gal I'll pay her enough for burying clothes for her man—"

Galvan had taken a big drink of whiskey and now he leaned over, his teeth bared as if he were grinning. Only it wasn't a grin. His light blue eyes were

"I want the truth about my husband"

wicked. There was a heavy silence as men rose from tables or stepped back from the bar.

Galvan spat his mouthful of whiskey into Rivers' face.

THE BIG man came to his feet with a bellow of rage, clawing at his eyes and screaming that he had been blinded. But he had closed his eyes instinctively and the whiskey had not impaired his vision. He blinked his eyes but before he could move, Kephart, who had been evidently enjoying the scene, said, "Don't use a gun, Mart."

Mart Rivers hesitated a moment, his heavy shoulders hunched. Then he looked at Kephart. Kephart wore a neat black suit and a white shirt and string tie. His hair was brushed. He was dapper and smiling.

Slowly Rivers unbuckled his gunbelt and laid the rig on the table. He began to grin again. He cracked his thick knuckles. "I'm going to stomp your head into the floor," he warned Galvan.

Galvan put his gun on the bar.

O'Hearn said, "Not in here, Mike. Don't bust up my place."

Galvan took a drink from the bottle. When the albino, Oakum, got up from his chair and started to angle in from one side, Ruel Bellarmine drew a derringer. "Stay put," the Southerner warned.

BOTH Oakum and Kephart looked around, surprised at Bellarmine's cool order. Oakum sat back down in his chair. Kephart looked at Bellarmine, saying, "You owe me a hundred dollars in chips. You'd better have the money."

Rivers came in quickly, head lowered, hoping to catch Galvan off guard and smash him against the front of the bar. Galvan waited until the last moment, then stepped aside. Rivers struck the bar with a solid smash, knocking over bottles and glasses. As he straightened up, Galvan hit him on the side of the head.

Rivers cried, "I'll kill you, Galvan. I'll kill you sure as hell!"

Galvan struck him again, then danced away. It was foolhardy trying to fight so large a man. But the tequila and the whiskey and the grief at the passing of one of his riders had made him reckless. That and Rivers' foul insult to the widow of Guiterrez.

Rivers caught him around the waist, lifted him and threw him against a table. Instead of shattering, the table upended and Galvan skated across the top and landed on his shoulders. He rolled away from Rivers' boots, but even so one of them caught him at the temple and set his head to ringing. He seized the big man's thick leg and levered against it. Rivers fell to the floor with a jarring crash.

Instantly Rivers was on his feet, snatching up a stack of heavy plates from the free lunch counter. He hurled these and Galvan took the full impact against his chest. The blow knocked him off balance and, as he fell, Rivers rammed him with a shoulder. Galvan was knocked crashing into a chair. He got to his feet and tried to pick up the chair and hit Rivers over the head with it. But the big man snatched it from his hands and splintered it against the wall when Galvan ducked. By this time half the town was crowded into the barroom or hovering at the front windows and doors. Another group were at the alley entrance.

ONLOOKERS were obviously impressed with the physical proportions of Galvan's opponent. "It'll take two good men to whip him, Galvan!" one of them shouted.

And Galvan knew they were right. River's height and weight made him formidable. His arms were long and in order to hit him, Galvan had to step in close and risk getting butchered.

Rivers was coming for him again, murder in his eyes for Galvan had hurt him with the few blows he had been able to land. There was a gash on the right side of Rivers' face and his nose was swollen.

Those immense fists began ripping the air in front of Mike Galvan. The drinks Galvan had taken were wearing off. Now he was cold sober, realizing if there had to be a fight with Rivers it should have been with a gun. From the corner of his eye he saw the concern on Ruel Bellarmine's face. The slender man still held Kephart and Oakum under the muzzle of his derringer. From behind the bar O'Hearn was shouting encouragement to Galvan, apparently no longer concerned over the wreckage the fight had produced.

"Keep away from him, Mike!" O'Hearn shouted.

Galvan backed up. He turned sideways and stepped in when Rivers missed a wild swing at his head. He struck the big man in the stomach and the blow turned Rivers' face a sickly green. He retched. Then, wiping his mouth with a thick forearm, he came in again. Galvan managed to sidestep and strike him on the cut right cheek. Rivers bellowed and Galvan's right arm felt numb from the blow. For a moment he thought that he had broken a bone in his hand.

Rivers was running for him, maddened by pain and his inability to put Galvan quickly on the floor where his face could be stomped by heavy boots. Galvan ducked around the table that held the free lunch. He picked up the big hambone. With two hands he drew it back over his head and struck Rivers full in the face. The blow shattered the man's nose. His face was covered with ham fat and blood. He reeled and grabbed a stack of plates and hurled them. Galvan took the plates on a shoulder and, because Rivers was off balance, Galvan sensed his opportunity. He came in quickly and brought up his right fist. It crashed against Rivers' jaw like a hurled stone. The big man's momentum and the powerful blow toppled him. He plunged a few steps, tripped over the wrecked chair awkwardly and fell headlong.

Kephart said with surprising candor, "You whipped him fair and square, Galvan."

Jody Oakum only glared at Galvan.

THE CROWD broke for the bar and O'Hearn made up his losses in wreckage with the whiskey he sold in the next few minutes.

When Galvan had tucked in his shirttail and caught his breath, Kephart said, "Buy you a drink?"

"Rivers needs the drink," Galvan said, jerking his head at the big man who had sat up on the floor.

Kephart seemed amused. "You broke his nose."

"It was the hambone that did it."

"Even so, no man ever got close enough to do that before. He's killed three men in brawls such as this. Consider yourself lucky."

"I do. But I'll never fight him again. Not with my fists. Next time I'll take a gun if he crosses me."

Ruel Bellarmine had holstered his derringer. He had been drunk but now he was sober. He looked drawn and shaky and Galvan knew he had come to town to drown Lorene's refusal of his proposal.

Kephart said, looking at Bellarmine, "You owe me ninety-eight dollars."

Bellarmine looked sick. "I'll give you an IOU."

Kephart shook his head. "If a man can't afford to lose he shouldn't play poker."

"You're right," Bellarmine agreed, embarrassed. He looked across Kephart's slender shoulder at Galvan. "Unlucky in love, lucky at cards. That's the way I thought it would run."

Knowing the crowd was watching, Kephart seemed to enjoy being able to humiliate the Southerner. "I want my money now. Either that or I'll take payment in beef."

Before Bellarmine could agree, Galvan called him to the bar. To O'Hearn he said, "Give Bellarmine ninety-eight dollars. I'll sign an IOU for it."

The bald saloonkeeper said, "I'll do it for you, Mike."

"And make it enough extra to pay for the damage to your place."

O'Hearn shook his head, looking at Kephart. "It was worth it, Mike."

Bellarmine was obviously embarrassed

and Galvan could not help but feel sorry for him. "You've done enough for me," Bellarmine said. "I can't let you do it, Mike."

Galvan observed Kephart and his men watching them from a table. Rivers was glaring. His nose was flattened and the cut on his cheek was bleeding. Galvan was unmarked, save for a bruise under his right eye. But his body ached from the savage pounding Rivers had given him.

WHEN O'Hearn had counted out ninety-eight dollars, Galvan gave the money to Bellarmine. "Pay Kephart off, but watch who you gamble with after this. They want you boxed for some reason."

"I should have paid them in beef."

"You ever let them get a lien on one of your cows and it'll be a foot in the door. You'll end up with no cattle."

Bellarmine seemed thoughtful. He said softly, "What is Kephart after?"

"A foothold in this country. And I'm thinking he doesn't give a damn how he gets it."

Bellarmine followed Galvan outside. "Watch yourself, Mike. Rivers won't forget this." When Galvan made no reply, the Southerner said, "You could do worse than marry Lorene yourself."

Galvan said sharply, "Forget those ideas, Ruel."

"I'd have been jealous once, maybe," Bellarmine admitted. "But she turned me down. Now that I don't have a chance I'd like to see you marry her."

Galvan tried to laugh it off. "You think that if I was her husband I'd forget about the lease money. You're worried if she marries somebody else her new husband might clamp down on you."

"I've considered the possibility."

Galvan clapped him on a shoulder. "Don't worry. Lorene isn't going to marry anybody."

"You're a fool not to, Mike."

"Even if I thought of the idea it wouldn't be fair."

"Fair? Why not? You were Matt's friend, Mike. He trusted you. He's left a widow who is out of place in this country." He gave him a rueful smile. "Even as I am out of place. But you know the cattle business."

Galvan shook his head. "Just because a man knows the cattle business isn't enough to make a woman want him for a husband."

Bellarmine stepped close, his shadowed face serious. "If you don't marry her somebody is going to come along and take Angle Iron away from her. The wrong kind of a husband could do that."

"I'll think it over."

ALL THE way back to the ranch, Galvan considered his position. Bellarmine had an ulterior motive in his suggestion, he tried to tell himself. Bellarmine had cows but they were in the brush and he had no money to hire a trained crew to get them out. Yet Galvan also knew that Bellarmine was a gentleman and was concerned with Lorene's welfare. Perhaps not so much for the woman herself, as for the memory of Matt Ellender.

The next morning as he crossed the yard to the corral he heard Lorene call to him.

"What happened to your face, Mike?"

"A horse threw me."

She seemed instantly concerned. "I'm glad you weren't really hurt, Mike." She had instinctively extended a hand to touch his arm. He felt the pressure of her fingers and remembered what Bellarmine had said last night.

But instead of making the most of the moment he said, "Guiterrez died last night. We'll ride to Alto for the funeral this afternoon."

Lorene's face went white. "Oh, his poor wife—" Then she said angrily, "Sometimes I hate this place, Mike. Seeing men die. And for what?"

He smiled bitterly. "I've asked myself that same question a lot of times."

"If it wasn't for you, I'd sell out and go back to Chicago. I'm beginning to

wonder if this is any place for a woman."

"You liked it well enough to marry Matt and come out here."

"But Matt was strong." She clenched her hands. "This place needs a strong man."

"Bellarmine is in love with you."

"I said a strong man, Mike." Her eyes were suddenly wet as she watched him. Then, when he did not speak, her lips trembled and she said, "Oh, damn you, Mike," and fled into the house.

HE STARED after her thoughtfully. But he forgot the matter during the next few days when he took his vaqueros over east to buy some horses for the remuda from John Michaelson. The buying took three days. There was much passing of the jug and plenty of good food. Michaelson made a ritual out of selling horses. He had good mounts and he knew it. He drove sharp bargains but gave back a lot of the profit in food and drink.

An easy-going fat man, Michaelson lounged on a bench while the twenty head Galvan had purchased were made ready to drive back to Angle Iron. "How's Lorene?" he asked.

Galvan said she was fine. "She went out of mourning last week."

"Lorene's a handsome woman." Michaelson puffed on a cigar. "Matt would want her taken care of."

"I'm doing the best I can for her," Galvan said, feeling his face flush under Michaelson's steady gaze.

"You still sweet on that schoolmarm? What's her name? Oh, yes, Cora Desmond."

Galvan gave a short laugh. "We've been friends for a long time. She has her work, I have mine. We haven't time to get sweet on each other."

Michaelson leaned forward. "Some men work a lifetime and never get an opportunity like you have."

Galvan was smoking one of Michaelson's cigars. "I like my job," he said uneasily. "That about as far as it goes."

"Matt Ellender's widow has a ranch. She needs somebody to run it for her."

"I've been trying to do that."

"But she needs a husband." Michaelson looked at him. "You could do worse, Mike."

Galvan said thinly, "Has Bellarmine been talking to you?"

Michaelson studied the smoking tip of his cigar. "Face facts, Mike. It would be a partnership as well as a marriage. She's got a ranch, but can't run it. You've got the savvy. You'd be doing more for her than she'd be doing for you."

"Lorene hasn't given me any sign that she'd take me for a husband."

"Maybe you've never given her a chance." He squared around on the bench, his plump face serious. "I'm a lot older than you, Mike. I've seen trouble come to this country and I've seen peaceful days. It goes in cycles. Well, I can smell trouble coming."

Galvan said, "Do you know a man named Kephart?"

"I don't know him. But I know this much about him. He's been asking too many questions around the country about the Angle Iron."

"I'm not surprised," Galvan said.

"That's one reason Lorene needs help. A foreman has certain rights, but if trouble comes you'll be able to do a lot more for the Angle Iron as Lorene's husband."

Galvan got his horse, anxious to be on his way. "I'll let you know about it, John," he said, and started his vaqueros herding the horses toward the Ellender ranch.

ON THE outskirts of Alto the tolling of the schoolbell reminded him of Cora Desmond. He made a sudden decision and told Sanchez to take the horses on to the ranch.

Galvan rode to the empty schoolyard. Cora was studying some papers at her desk. A shaft of sunlight through the open doorway put a sheen on her chestnut hair. At the sound of his step she looked up, a warm smile on her lips. "Mike, how nice of you to stop by."

She offered him her hand man-fashion and he remembered then that theirs was a comradeship dating back half a dozen

years. Her hazel eyes grew concerned. "I heard about your fight," she said and touched a bruise on his face. "I'm glad you weren't hurt."

They went out to a bench on the shady side of the schoolhouse. In the distance Galvan could see the cloud of yellow dust kicked up by the horses Sanchez was driving to the ranch.

"We've always been friends, Cora," he said, nervously twisting the brim of his hat.

"Of course, Mike. I've always taken that for granted." She had faced around on the bench, an eagerness in her. She had been born in this country and orphaned here. Her father had been Sam Houston's friend.

"Lorene's out of mourning," Galvan said.

"Yes, I noticed," Cora said a little stiffly.

He was surprised. "You've seen her?"

Cora nodded. "She drove the wagon to town yesterday." She gave a short laugh. "I saw her with Burke Kephart. He's caught the eye of all the women."

Galvan frowned, wondering why the fact that Lorene had come to town surprised him. He had warned her about traveling around the country alone.

"You're worried about her," Cora said. She was a tall girl. Her face had the mark of the sun on it; there were freckles on the tip of her nose. She was full-bosomed, slender at the waist.

Galvan said, "She knows nothing about the cattle business. While Matt was alive it was all right. Because he was strong—"

"Are you the strong man she needs now, Mike?" the girl said quietly.

GALVAN felt uncomfortable. He liked Cora and had always felt at ease around her. Many times he wonderd why she hadn't married one of the local men. Several of them had asked her, he was sure of that.

"With you it's different, Cora," he said. "You've got your work here at the school. Lorene has nothing."

Angrily she said, "What makes you think I enjoy living alone?"

He stared at her a moment, his mouth open. "Well, you never got married—"

She looked down at her clenched hands. "Maybe the right man never asked me."

He tried to smile. "You'll find the right man."

Cora Desmond got to her feet, staring down at him so that sunlight ran down the part in her thick chestnut hair. "I have some papers to finish correcting, Mike."

"See, what did I tell you? The school is your life."

He couldn't understand the paleness of her face. Always he had considered her a level-headed girl. Twice a year he had taken her to the dance at the Hall. Last summer they had gone on a picnic. But now she seemed thoroughly angry with him.

Suddenly he said, "I need your advice."

"Ask it, although I can guess what it is."

"Should I marry Lorene Ellender?"

She fiddled with a small gold watch pinned to the front of her brown dress. "That's a question you'll have to decide for yourself, Mike. And I really must get back to my work." Her voice was bitter. "As you said, the school is my life."

He watched her enter the empty schoolhouse, her shoulders straight. He stood with his hat in his hand, wondering if from now on things would ever be quite the same between them. He felt a regret and started to call to her, then changed his mind. He caught up his mount and rode to catch up to Sanchez and the horses.

THE NEXT afternoon Galvan helped Sanchez install a new gear in the windmill. It was in the middle of the afternoon when he saw a buggy coming down the Alto road. Behind the buggy was a saddle horse tied to a seat bracket. Two horsemen trailed the buggy. Even at this distance Galvan could pick out the big frame of Mart Rivers. He seemed to almost dwarf the cowpony he was riding.

Sanchez was also peering down the road. His dark face was angered, for by this time he knew about the fight at O'Hearn's and the insult to Guiterrez' widow. "Señor Kephart with the Señora,"

Sanchez said thickly, and pointed at the buggy.

Galvan gave the slender Mexican an oblique glance. "Keep out of trouble, Luis," he said, and brushed a hand against the belt knife Sanchez always wore. "Finish putting in that gear. I'll see what the boss is doing with those scum."

Sanchez went back to his task. Galvan caught up his horse and rode to the house, where Kephart was just helping Lorene from the buggy. The woman's pretty face was flushed and she was laughing at something Kephart had said.

When Galvan swung down, Lorene said, "I believe you know Mr. Kephart—"

Kephart wore a faint smile. There was a trace of dust on the shoulders of his dark coat. "Galvan and I have met, Mrs. Ellender," he said.

If Lorene noticed Galvan's tight face she gave no indication. Instead she said happily, "They're staying for supper, Mike. You'll join us in the house?"

It was not a request but a command, Galvan thought. She turned and offered her arm to Kephart and allowed him to lead her to the arbor at the far side of the house.

Rivers and Oakum, the albino, tied their horses and squatted on their heels beside the hitchrail. They put their heads together and, looking at Galvan, laughed. Galvan flushed to the roots of his hair, wondering what they found so amusing about him. He went into his quarters, slamming the door behind him. Surely, he told himself, Lorene must have known about his fight with Rivers. So how in all decency could she invite Kephart's friends here? Then he decided she probably had no knowledge of the fight, because no one would want to worry her by talking about it.

He tried to keep himself busy with the account book. This was the part of his job he hated. He was trying to concentrate on the figures when he heard a commotion outside. A man screamed. Drawing his

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gun. Galvan burst through the doorway. Over by the windmill he saw the towering Mart Rivers clutching his left shoulder, trying to stop a flow of blood with his fingers. Sanchez was on his knees beside the windmill, a trickle of blood angling across his dark chin. He had lost his hat and there was a sprinkling of dust on his dark hair. In one hand he gripped a knife. Jody Oakum stood to one side, just now reaching for a gun.

Galvan shouted, "Hold it, Oakum!" and when the man hesitated, put a shot over his head.

LORENE and Burke Kephart had come to a corner of the house, shading their eyes against the sun. The sound of the shot had brought Monjosa from the horse-breaking corral, and those vaqueros in from the range came streaming up from the bunkhouse and the family adobes.

Still holding his gun, Galvan advanced on Oakum, who was watching over his shoulder, but now making no move toward his belt. Mart Rivers was cursing, looking a little sick around the eyes. The left sleeve of his shirt was stained with blood.

"What happened, Luis?" Galvan demanded.

Luis Sanchez got slowly to his feet and wiped the blood from his chin with the back of a hand. His dark eyes were hot and wicked as he looked at the two Kephart men. "They call me damn *cholo.*" He jerked a thumb at Rivers. "He say I am the son of a pig and a goat. He hit me and I swear by the saints these *Americanos* do not whip me!" He stood with his head hunched between his narrow shoulders, still gripping his knife.

Lorene, her face white with anger, shoved her way through the crowd of vaqueros. "You're the foreman," she told Galvan severely. "Send these men back to work!"

Galvan felt a resentment that she should shout at him this way in front of the men. He jerked his head at the vaqueros and they began to drift away. But they gave the Kephart men angry glances, for they had overheard the reason for the altercation. Sanchez sheathed his knife and joined them.

"I demand an explanation for this," Lorene cried, gesturing at the wounded Mart Rivers.

Patiently Galvan explained.

Burke Kephart frowned. He stood at Lorene's side, a heavy concern on his face. "I don't think my men would provoke a fight, Mrs. Ellender."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Galvan said quietly.

Kephart spread his hands. "I don't doubt your word, Galvan. But obviously your man lied about it to you." He looked at the albino. "What really happened, Jody?"

Jody Oakum said sullenly, "We was just standing here watching the Mex fix the windmill. He got tough with us, but me and Mart didn't want no trouble, so we started to walk off. That's when the Mex jumped Mart. When Mart hit him, the Mex pulled a knife and cut him."

Galvan said, "Sanchez wouldn't cause trouble unless he was forced to defend himself."

Kephart said, "I think we had better leave, Mrs. Ellender. I don't propose to stand still and have my men called fools and liars."

Lorene shook her head. "I want you to stay." She turned on Galvan, her eyes bright with anger. "I'm surprised at you standing up for Sanchez. It's common knowledge that if you turn your back on a Mexican, he'll put a knife in it."

"Who's been talking to you, Lorene?" Galvan asked. "It doesn't sound like you. These Mexicans were loyal to Matt. They're loyal to you."

Kephart said, "Please, Mrs. Ellender. I don't want to cause friction between your foreman and yourself."

Lorene walked up to Mart Rivers. "I have clean cloths in the house we can use for bandages. Come in and I'll dress your arm."

"That's nice of you, ma'am," Rivers said.

Halfway across the yard, Lorene looked

back at Galvan. "Sanchez attacked one of my guests. I won't tolerate that, Mike. I want you to fire him!"

Galvan watched them go into the house. On the veranda, Kephart looked back, to give Galvan a faint, triumphant smile.

FEELING helpless and thoroughly angered, Galvan went to the bunkhouse, where the vaqueros were crowded around Sanchez. Galvan laid a hand on the segundo's shoulder.

Sanchez took this gesture of sympathy with a shrug. "Those hombres start a fight. They know I will be angry when they call me the son of a pig. But they do it deliberate." He looked at Galvan. "Why, *amigo?*"

Galvan looked around the circle of tense, excited faces, then said, "I wish I knew. Start wearing a gun, Luis," he told the *segundo*, "and leave your knife in the bunkhouse."

Luis Sanchez pointed at the old scars under his eyes. "I will not let those hombres hit me with their fists."

"Then shoot them if they won't leave you alone. They want to be treated like white men. So use a bullet instead of a knife."

"That I will do, *compadre,*" Sanchez vowed.

An old Mexican, Fernando Alvarez, shook his gray head. "Much trouble we have." He touched himself over the heart. "I feel it here, amigo." He was not yet fifty, but the hard years in the brush country had taken their toll. He laid a hand on Galvan's arm, saying in Spanish, "We will be with you, *chico,*" using a term of affection to the younger man.

Although he had originally been invited to the house, Galvan took supper with the hands in the cookshack. Later, when he sat under the overhang in front of the bunkhouse, having an evening cigarette, he thought of his thankless job here. He had spent a year getting Lorene's affairs in shape and when he had the paper work straightened out, she took the side of strangers against her foreman and one of his men.

Occasionally he would hear Lorene's too-brittle laughter, and Kephart's smooth voice. Then they came from the house and Lorene stood in the doorway and waved to Kephart. Rivers wore his left arm in a sling fashioned from white cloth.

Kephart said, "We appreciate your hospitality, Mrs. Ellender.

"You were more than welcome, Mr. Kephart."

Then the three men crossed the yard on their horses and three pairs of eyes turned toward Galvan and the silent vaqueros in front of the bunkhouse.

"*Adios,* Galvan," Kephart said, a trace of mockery in his voice.

WHEN THEY had been gone half an hour, Galvan decided to act. He had thought that perhaps Lorene would come to the bunkhouse, realizing she had made a mistake and apologize to Sanchez. But she had not done so. Lamplight was still soft in the living room windows when Galvan crossed the veranda and knocked on the door. In a moment Lorene appeared. She had taken down her hair and now it fell about her shoulders in a yellow wave.

"I think we have something to talk over," Galvan said coldly.

"Perhaps we have," she said, and stepped aside so he could enter.

He threw his hat on a chair. "You've got to understand one thing, Lorene. Kephart is trying to stir up trouble."

"He warned me you might say that," she told him.

Exasperated, Galvan lifted his hands, let them fall to his sides.

Lorene said, "Mr. Kephart has been nice to me. I don't particularly like his two friends, but—"

"At least we agree on that point."

She lifted a hand. "Let me finish, Mike. Burke Kephart knew Matt and I feel a certain obligation to be nice to him while he is in our part of the country."

"Kephart didn't know Matt."

"Why are you so sure?"

"It's a feeling I have."

She gave a short laugh. "You knew

all of Matt's friends?"

"I think so."

"Did you know that besides doing business together my father and Matt were fast friends?"

"No, I didn't know that," Galvan admitted.

"Well, it's true." She came to stand close to him, some of the anger leaving her eyes. "Don't you see it's possible you didn't know that Matt and Kephart were friends?"

Galvan looked at her with exasperation. "Matt would never have a man like Kephart around the place."

"You're mule-headed, Mike."

"Kephart is going to make trouble."

"I don't believe it."

"Why else did Rivers and Oakum call Sanchez the son of a pig?"

She caught the ends of her long hair and began to make a braid. "I really can't see why Sanchez should be angry over what they called him."

"It's an insult to a Mexican."

She made an angry gesture with her shoulders. "You and your Mexicans," she said bitterly. "I'm beginning to think like Kephart, that Americans would make much better ranch hands—"

"Kephart is getting your ear, Lorene. Don't believe what he says about your riders. You'll never find a more loyal bunch of men than you've got right now."

She tapped her foot. "Have you fired Sanchez?"

"No."

"So you intend to disobey me?"

"Yes."

His quiet defiance infuriated her. She snatched up a book from a sideboard and started to hurl it at him. But he caught her roughly by the arms and pulled her against him. The book fell to the floor at their feet. Lorene stood looking up at him, her lips slightly parted.

In that moment Galvan remembered what Bellarmine had urged him to do and how Michaelson had said he was a fool in so many words if he didn't take advantage of his God-given opportunity. Then he remembered Cora and how she had looked at him. The resolve died in him a little but he tried desperately to rekindle it.

His grip tightened on her arms. "Lorene," he whispered.

"Yes, Mike?"

"I—I—" Suddenly he could not finish. He stepped back, knowing it would be a grim joke on her if he married her. To him she was only a pretty woman who had been married to his boss. A woman to whom he owed a certain amount of loyalty.

"I wish you'd marry Ruel Bellarmine," he said.

She stood rubbing her arms where he had gripped her. She seemed furious. "Get out of here and leave me alone!" she cried and turning, fled blindly into the bedroom.

Before he left the house he thought he heard her sobbing, but he couldn't be sure.

FOR THE next two days Lorene did not leave the house. Several times Galvan was on the point of going to the house on some pretext or other, but lost his nerve at the last moment. He couldn't understand her strange behavior, unless she was still angered that he had refused to fire Sanchez.

To play it safe he sent Sanchez to one of the line camps with a crew, ostensibly to repair the roof before the winter rains set in. By the time Sanchez returned, Galvan reasoned, Lorene would be over her peeve.

On the third day there was occasion to see Lorene. Elva Guiterrez wished to return to her home in Sonora, so Galvan had some of the men crate up her few belongings and hitch up the wagon so she could go to Alto and take the stage. From the safe he took her dead husband's salary for the month in which he had been killed. Then Galvan shook out two hundred dollars in gold from the leather sack that contained his own savings. He put the money in a canvas sack that the woman could tie

someplace under her clothing.

He went to the house where Lorene met him at the door. "Well, Mike," she said, "The way you were avoiding me, I began to think perhaps I had smallpox."

He told her about Guiterrez's widow going home to her people. "Guiterrez grew up here. Matt liked him. I—"

Lorene said thinly, still showing her anger, "That's the trouble with Mexicans. They always have women around. A crew of American riders would be bachelors."

He wanted to slap her. "Kephart seems to have more influence with you than I have." He turned his back and walked to the wagon in the yard. Lorene watched him from the veranda, frowning. Elva Guiterrez, a plump, dark-haired girl, took the sack of money Galvan handed her. The vaqueros who were at headquarters stood with some of the women, quietly surrounding the wagon.

Just before Monjosa lifted the reins to drive off, Lorene cried, "Just a moment, please."

She ran across the yard, the hem of a long green dress trailing in the dust. She pressed something into Elva's hands. Galvan heard the unmistakable clink of gold coins. Then Lorene said, self-consciously, "I—I'm terribly sorry about your husband. We liked him so very much." Then rising to the step, she kissed the girl on the cheek, murmuring, "I, too, know what it is to be a widow."

Elva Guiterrez gave her a faint smile of understanding. As the wagon moved down the road, the vaqueros cried, "*Vaya con Dios!*"

Galvan caught up with Lorene and fell in step with her. "That was a nice thing you did, Lorene."

He started to angle toward the bunkhouse. Lorene said, "You don't think I do many nice things, do you, Mike?"

He gave her a tolerant smile. "It's just because you're not used to this country and its people. You had a good start but then Matt died and left you alone."

"Do you think Cora Desmond has more understanding of this country and its people?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course. She was born and raised here." And then he realized she was angered again and wondered at the reason for it.

SUDDENLY he had a desire to get away from the ranch. He saddled up and rode to Alto. By the time he reached town it was twilight and the walks were nearly deserted because it was the supper hour. He racked his horse in front of O'Hearn's. Across the street he saw Cora Desmond just coming out of Rawson's Store. He called to her and she turned and waited. She wore a gray dress, the sleeves pushed up over her tanned forearms.

He was smiling, relieved somehow to see her. But she said coolly, when he had crossed the street, "You look like the bearer of glad tidings."

"It just makes me feel good to see you again, Cora."

"Oh?" She seemed to consider this a moment, then said, "I thought perhaps you were going to tell me that Lorene had accepted you as a husband."

Galvan was surprised at the bitterness in her voice. 'You don't like Lorene, do you?"

"She's a headstrong woman and someday she'll bring real trouble to this country."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

He stood in awkward silence a moment, then said, "I'd like to take you to supper."

"Not tonight, Mike," she said, not looking at him. "Mrs. Rawson is teaching me to crochet." She turned down the walk and he watched her until the shadows folded across her back.

THOUGHTFULLY Galvan crossed the street to O'Hearn's. When he had a beer O'Hearn said, "I see Mart Rivers is wearing his arm in a sling."

"Sanchez should have tried for his throat instead of a shoulder."

O'Hearn looked worried. There were only two other customers in the bar. O'Hearn leaned close and lowered his

voice. "Rudy Bench was through here on the noon stage today." Bench was a stage driver who occasionally stopped over in Alto and got drunk with his old crony O'Hearn. "Rudy seen Rivers and that albino in front of the stable and recognized them as two gents who left El Paso one jump ahead of a rope."

Galvan's brows lifted. "Does Rudy know why they got out of the country?"

"Them two got a liking for cattle. Other people's cattle. Oakum done two years at Yuma, so Rudy says."

Galvan finished his beer, then got a room at the hotel. The next morning he rode back to Angle Iron, having settled nothing by his trip to town. He had seen Cora and she had treated him coolly. The news O'Hearn had imparted had not disturbed him too much for he had suspected that Kephart's two friends were no strangers to a wide loop.

When he got to the ranch he found a note from Lorene weighted on his desk.

> Dear Mike: We're getting on each other's nerves and I don't like that. It's probably all my fault, so I'm going to Austin to visit my aunt for two weeks and regain my perspective.
>
> Lorene.

HE THREW the note into a trash box beside his desk and went outside. Funny she hadn't gone to Alto to take the stage. Monjosa said she had asked him to hitch up the buggy and drive her to Zelda's, a tough saloon and way station where she could get the stage. It was closer than driving to Alto, but Galvan had laid down a rule that the Angle Iron hands did their drinking in town. There was too much chance for trouble at Zelda's.

"You should have taken her to town," Galvan told the horse breaker, angered that Lorene would leave while he was absent from the ranch.

Monjosa shrugged and grinned. "I do not argue with the Señora," he said.

Galvan frowned. "Where did she hear about Zelda's?"

"She say the Señor Kephart tell her it is better place to take the stage."

Galvan went to his office and tried to fix up the books, but he couldn't add a column of figures and get the same answer twice.

The next two weeks Galvan spent working ladinos out from the south sections, the chore that had been halted when Guiterrez was gored. One night he returned to headquarters to find Ruel Bellarmine waiting for him on the veranda of the big house. The tall Southerner waved a hand. He wore his black merino suit and a white shirt. He had a bottle at his elbow and Galvan knew he had probably taken it from Lorene's cherrywood liquor cabinet. But he felt no anger that Bellarmine would help himself. Somehow the man looked as if he belonged on that veranda, sitting whipstock straight in his chair, aristocratic and soft-spoken.

Galvan came tiredly to the veranda while his vaqueros moved to the bunkhouse, the married ones greeted with shrill cries from their womenfolks.

"A hard life, Mike," Bellarmine said with a faint grin and shoved over the bottle.

Galvan upended it. It was brandy and he coughed from the potent drink. He caught his breath and had another. "You ought to warn a man," he told Bellarmine with mock severity. "I could burn out my gut before I knew I wasn't drinking whiskey."

"Brandy is strong," Bellarmine said softly, picking up the bottle and studying it against the afternoon sun. "As you say I should have warned you. But maybe I had other warnings on my mind."

The glow generated by the liquor had spread through Galvan's tired body. But now he straightened up in his chair. "You can speak plainer than that, Ruel."

Bellarmine said, "I was in O'Hearn's yesterday. That big one you whipped was making his brag that he's going to get you, Mike."

Galvan felt a vast relief. He had thought maybe Bellarmine had heard some word from Lorene and that she was possibly in trouble. "I can take care of Rivers."

"He's a bad one, Mike. And so is Oakum. I don't know which is the worse."

It was the first time since that night in Alto that Galvan felt like getting drunk. That night he had been grieved at the death of Guiterrez. But tonight it was just a letdown from the hard and dangerous task of working the brush for stray cattle.

Bellarmine said, "If a man like Rivers was after me, I'd leave the country fast, Mike."

"I've given some thought to leaving the country," Galvan said, corking the bottle. "But not because of Rivers."

"Why, then?"

Galvan shrugged. "Restless, I guess. Too long in one place."

"Is it Lorene?"

Galvan waited a moment before replying. "There's drawbacks working for a woman."

Bellarmine straightened around in his chair. From the married quarters came the sound of a guitar and a man singing in Spanish. Monjosa was working late, trying to break a horse in the corral.

Bellarmine gripped the bottle in both hands. "Rivers was also making his brag about something else. He says Kephart would make a good husband for Lorene."

Galvan let the air out between his stiffened lips. "Damn," he said, then quickly added, "Lorene would never marry a man like that."

"I don't know about that. Kephart has a certain charm that appeals to women."

Galvan stared across the yard, shadowed now as the sun dipped below the peak of the barn roof. "I never figured on Lorene marrying him."

"She's a headstrong woman and she knows nothing about this kind of life or the men we have to deal with here." He gave an uneasy laugh. "As a matter of fact, I'm as much of a greenhorn as she is."

"I'll have a talk with her," Galvan promised.

"It may take more than talk."

Galvan stared at the shadowed, aristocratic face. "Still think I should marry her, is that the reason you rode over?"

"You owe it to Matt Ellender."

Galvan slammed a fist against the porch rail. "Matt paid me a salary and I appreciate it. He was my friend. But does that mean I'm obligated to marry his widow?"

"She's a good looking woman, Mike. And I believe she'd fall in love with you if you'd give her half a chance." He smiled. "Just once don't freeze up when you get around women."

"I never realized I froze up," Galvan said. "Seems you and me have had our times with women up at 'Paso—"

"I mean the kind that really might like you, Mike."

"Such as who?"

"Cora Desmond, for one."

"Cora and I are good friends."

"I guess you've never noticed the way

AUTOMATIC LAUNDRY OF THE PLAINS

THE unpleasant problem of body lice was solved by the trappers of the Texas plains and mountains through a unique method of laundering. The infested garment was placed on an anthill, where the swarming ants ate up the lice. After the lice were disposed of the ants were "rinsed" out by vigorous shaking. The trapper's buckskin shirt was now spotlessly clean except for the stains of grease, blood and whisky which nobody worried about anyway.

—Robert Stephens

her face lights up when she sees you coming."

Galvan took another drink. The brandy made him perspire. "You're trying to marry me off, Ruel," he said, trying to get the talk back on the basis he liked, "so you won't have to pay up that lease money."

"I may have an ulterior motive," Bellarmine admitted candidly, "but on the other hand if I can't have Lorene and the ranch that goes with her, I want you to be the one to get it."

"You worry too much about other people, Ruel."

"No. I feel sorry for that girl, Mike. She's alone out here and if she marries somebody like Kephart you and me and some of Matt's friends one day will have to chip in enough money to feed her and buy her a ticket back to Chicago."

The grim possibility sobered Calvan. "I'll think it over, Ruel. I really will."

MONJOSA, driving a herd of horses out to one of the line camps the next day, reported a dead steer. He sent word back by Fernando Alvarez. Galvan couldn't see the urgency in the matter until he rode out to the spot with the graying Alvarez. It was a dead Angle Iron steer. A prime two year old. A few choice cuts of beef had been taken. The carcass had not been pulled into the brush as would normally be the case if some drifter had slow elked a little camp beef. This steer was left in the center of the road—a flagrant insult to Angle Iron.

Thoroughly angered, Galvan followed a pair of horse tracks. Every few feet he would see puddles of blood in the sand and knew the riders had carried the fresh cuts of beef. He found where they had camped. Here were tracks of at least a dozen horses. The coals of the campfire were still warm. Well-gnawed beef bones had been scattered around the campsite.

"W'at you think?" Alvarez asked.

"I think we've got some cow thieves in our country, Fernando. Find Sanchez. He's working with a crew at Davidow's Cut. Tell him to meet me at Zelda's."

"Zelda's?" Alvarez said. "But you say we never should go there."

"We're making an exception this time."

WHEN the gray-haired vaquero rode off, Galvan began following the tracks of the horsemen. They led south and west and if they were the type of men who would boldly kill a rancher's beef, they would stop at Zelda's. For that was the kind of a place it was.

As he rode he felt the heat of anger in him. It was as much a feeling of inadequacy as rage, for he felt helpless in dealing with the threat to the Angle Iron. Perhaps Bellarmine was right, he reflected. Marry the woman!

Ahead he saw Zelda's, a rambling one-story building set back from the road, its walls of sod making a dull blotch on the landscape. He waited until he saw Sanchez and the vaqueros riding up from the south, then rode to Zelda's. Eight horses were racked at the rail, which was unusual for this time of day. He inspected the brands on the horses, seeing they were Chainlink mounts.

Hearing a step on the hard-packed dirt veranda, Galvan looked up. A bow-legged man with a fiery red beard had come outside to stare at him. "You checking brands, mister?" the stranger asked thinly.

Galvan saw the rest of them come to the porch. A hard crew, he decided, heavily armed. There was the mark of the saddle on them and their hard and dangerous living was reflected in their faces.

COMING down the road were the Angle Iron vaqueros, the slender Sanchez in the lead. They fanned out across the road and waited. There were thirteen of them. Galvan shouted an order and they dismounted and followed him into the saloon, brushing past the men on the porch. This place had been named for the former woman owner who had run off with a drummer. A lank, one-eyed man named Joe Amberling now owned it. He wore galluses over his dirty undershirt.

"Tequila," Galvan told him.

When the one-eyed man set out bottles and glasses he said, "We don't see Angle Iron over this way very often."

"You'll see them a lot more, Amberling," Galvan said, "if we find another butchered steer in the road."

"Somebody slow elking your beef?" Amberling asked mildly, but from the tone of his voice Galvan knew he was aware of the dead steer and who had done the job. For he had the type of customers who would brag about a thing like that.

"Next time you see us," Galvan said for the benefit of the men who had filed back inside the barroom, "we'll ride with a rope."

The red-bearded man—Burt Dattig—was a little drunk. "You accusing us of killing your beef?"

Galvan gave him a cold smile. "Tracks led straight here to Zelda's." He looked the man over. "You'll do until I find somebody else to suspect."

"Angle Iron's pretty tough," Dattig said. "At least they think they are."

"Care to argue about it?" Galvan asked quietly.

When Dattig made no effort to accept the challenge, Galvan and his riders had their drink and filed outside. In so many words he had warned this new bunch that anybody with an eye for Angle Iron beef was going to find their feet off the ground under a noose.

As they rode away this new bunch gave Galvan some apprehension. Not that tough outfits hadn't drifted down to this country before, but it seemed coincidental that they'd arrive at the same time as Kephart and the pair of gunmen who were obviously his bodyguards. And Kephart and his friends had also been riding Chainlink horses. As they cut along the road the resolve to marry Lorene crystalized in him. As her husband he could take drastic measures to insure the safety of Angle Iron without having to consult with her.

Feeling more sure of himself than he had since the day Bellarmine first touched on the subject of marriage, Galvan led his men to the Angle Iron. Lorene should be back from Austin before the week was out, he decided. The moment she arrived he would have a quiet talk with her.

THREE days later Mart Rivers and Jody Oakum were in the Alto stable, lagging two-bit pieces with Lew Humphrey, the stableman, when they saw a rider head out of town. Because of his injured shoulder, Rivers had to depend on Oakum to roll his cigarettes, being unable to do the job himself with one hand. The albino was licking shut a cigarette he had fashioned for Rivers when he said, "Ain't that our friend?"

Oakum peered down the runway to the sun-swept street, where a slender Mexican in the saddle of a grulla was riding out of town. Oakum crumpled up the cigarette.

Rivers said, "Hey, that's my cigarette."

"You won't have time to smoke it," Oakum said. A few moments before he had tossed his twenty-five cent piece nearest the line they had drawn on the stable floor with a boot sole edge. He picked up the three coins while the lank Humphrey whined about his bad luck.

Oakum saddled his mount and Rivers' big gray.

The stableman said, "You ought to give me a chance to win back my money."

"You only lost a dollar, Lew," Oakum said. "You're lucky it wasn't more."

When Rivers grabbed the saddlehorn with his good hand and swung aboard the gray, Humphrey got a shrewd look on his face. "Why for you two so damn interested in Luis Sanchez?"

Oakum and Rivers exchanged glances.

"What gives you the idea we're interested?" Rivers said heavily, and shifted his left hand in the sling that by this time was stained from dirt.

"I seen the way you both looked when he rode out of town," Lew Humphrey said wisely. "You fellas up to something?"

Oakum spurred his horse, making it

rear so that the hostler had to step back to avoid being struck by the animal's forelegs. "You forget about Luis Sanchez," Oakum warned.

"I will if you'll lag once more for a dollar. If I win I'll be even with you two and then some."

Rivers started to curse. His heavy face was ugly and he bunched up his big right fist. "I'll lag your head if you ain't careful," he said from the saddle.

Oakum made no comment. He swung his horse close to the stableman and leaning down, struck the man across the face with the frame of his heavy revolver. Humphrey fell to the dirt runway, blood curving from a deep cut on his cheek.

When Oakum thumbed back the hammer of his gun, Humphrey cried, "No—no—"

Oakum grinned a little, his pale eyes wicked. "How's your memory?"

"Bad, bad. I won't remember a damn thing." Humphrey was sick and the blood was running down the front of his shirt. Through the meaty gash on the left side of his face could be seen the exposed and glaring white of his cheekbone. "I never seen nothing," he said and fell over into some loose straw in front of one of the stalls.

Rivers said loudly, "He'll keep his mouth shut now. That's for sure."

Jody Oakum laughed and holstered his gun and they spurred out into the hot sunlight. Instead of keeping to the road, they followed a trail that led through the edge of the brasada and would lead them to the road some five miles from the Angle Iron junction. They rode silently, keeping their horses at a steady pace. When they reached the road, they waited back in the brush.

"I could use that cigarette," Rivers said, hunching his heavy shoulders.

"I'll be glad when you can roll your own again," Oakum complained.

"Don't blame me," Rivers said. "If that damned Mex hadn't put a knife in me—"

"What in hell you crying about?" the albino asked in his thin, ugly voice. "You're going to take care of him."

"What do you reckon Kephart will say?" Rivers said when he had taken a drag on the cigarette Oakum had rolled for him.

"He'll like the idea. What's one Mexican more or less?"

"It'll put Galvan on our trail."

Oakum gave a short laugh. "You scared of him?"

Rivers took instant offense. "No, but he's tough."

"All I got to do is look at your face to remember how tough he is."

Rivers was angry. "Next time I'll kill him."

"Yeah but last time he whipped you."

"I was half-drunk," Rivers said, his voice thinning with an increasing rage.

"And Galvan was half drunk."

Because Oakum had a way of nagging a man into a fury Rivers always felt incapable of getting the better of him in a verbal battle. He had once considered the possibility that Oakum resented his size and strength and was therefore always trying to belittle him.

BEFORE Rivers' slow brain could reflect on this further, they saw the rider in the distance. The air was very still, a wisp of white cloud was torn across the dome of the sky. Behind them the brush rolled like a huge wave, impenetrable, fit for no living thing save for the wild Chihuahua cattle, the ladinos.

Oakum drew his rifle from the boot and levered in a shell, the sound clear and metallic.

Luis Sanchez rode slowly on his small Spanish pony that had the hair scraped from its flanks by a lifetime in the brush. Sanchez was thinking of good things, for Mike Galvan had told him in so many words that he would ask for the hand of the Señora. That was good, Sanchez reflected, for Señor Mike Galvan was *buena gente*. Sanchez looked forward to the new order when once again he would serve a *padrone*.

Suddenly he saw the two men, one on either side of the road, the small one with his back to the flat country that rolled

down toward the Angle Iron headquarters. The big man, the *cabron* Rivers with his arm in a sling, had his back to the brush. The albino had a rifle and Rivers held a revolver.

In that moment a chill touched Sanchez, not fear of the death he sensed would be upon him, but regret that he would not be part of the new and better life that would come to the Angle Iron, when a vaquero could ride again for his *padrone*, as he had ridden for Matt Ellender.

Sanchez did not slow the grulla, but kept the animal moving up the road. The grulla was nervous as if he, too, sensed the black intent of the men at the side of the road.

The albino, Jody Oakum, shouted, "What do you know, Rivers? It's the son of a pig!"

"He put a knife in me!" Rivers shouted back.

Luis Sanchez was straight in the saddle. His father had been a *lancero*, the finest of Mexican cavalry. The son of a *lancero* knew how to die, even as Sanchez' father had died throwing himself with a magnificent bravery at the solid wall of Taylor's men back in '40.

Sanchez cried, "Ai-i-i-i-i-i-", and spurred the grulla at the same moment, drawing his revolver so that the silver work along the barrel shone dully in the hot sunlight. He fired, but it was a futile gesture. Already the guns of the gringos had thrown their lead and he felt the shock that nearly tore him from the saddle. But the grulla by now was panicked and it swept down the road with the two men firing after it.

With his head upon his chest, Sanchez tried to shout again in defiance, "Ai-i-i-i-!" But the sound died in him and there was blood on his mouth.

GALVAN was in his quarters, trying to plan what he would say to Lorene. How did you ask a woman for her hand in marriage when you felt no eagerness? He wondered how it would be if Cora Desmond was not a school teacher and owned Angle Iron in place of Lorene. There was little time to reflect on this possibility, for a shout in the yard brought him to the door.

Vaqueros were streaming from the bunkhouse and from the quarters of the married men. They surrounded a rider who was bowed in the saddle of a grulla. Galvan rushed forward as Monjosa lowered Sanchez to the ground.

When Galvan had elbowed his way through his riders and knelt beside the segundo, he knew that only a stubborn refusal to die had kept life this long in the torn body. He had literally been shot to pieces and how he had managed to hang onto the saddle horn long enough to get back to the ranch was beyond explanation.

Sanchez opened his eyes and beckoned Galvan, who knelt in the dust and put his ear against the segundo's bleeding mouth.

Sanchez said in a strong voice, "*Dos malos hombres.* Rivers and the albino—"

His eyes closed and his head rolled to one side. Galvan straightened up, clenching his fists, a cold fury burgeoning through every fiber.

Monjosa, the horse breaker, covered Sanchez with a serape someone had brought from the bunkhouse. "We ride, Mike," he said. "Those two we hang."

Galvan looked at him, seeing the anger in the faces of the other vaqueros. Until then he had not realized Sanchez had spoken loudly enough for them all to hear.

"We will find them," Monjosa said, "in Alto. Taking the drink in O'Hearn's to celebrate the killing of Luis Sanchez."

When Monjosa hurried for the corral to saddle up, Galvan caught him by an arm and swung him around. "Let me handle this, Monjosa."

The horse breaker shook his dark head. "We find them and hang them," he said stubbornly.

Already the vaqueros were running to catch up their horses. Monjosa said, "We hang them with Sanchez' own rope—"

Galvan knew these men were right in their desire for vengeance. But if they hanged the two men it could fan to a fury

the hatred that still existed in some Americans toward the Mexicans.

Galvan pulled Monjosa away from the chattering vaqueros, knowing the horse breaker had taken the lead in this vengeance of Sanchez and would be followed by the others. "If Kephart has planned this to stir up bad feeling between your people and ours," Galvan explained patiently, "you'll be playing right into his hands if you go ahead with this."

FOR THE first time Galvan saw a dark suspicion in Monjosa's eyes. In Spanish Monjosa said, "Luis served you well. He was our brother, so we hang the men who murdered him. If you are afraid to ride against these men—"

"You know better than that, Monjosa," Galvan said roughly, and drew his revolver and cocked it. "I promise you this," he said loudly. "They'll die and I'll kill them both with this gun!"

The horsebreaker rubbed his jaw. "They should die before another sun—"

Galvan shoved his revolver back in its holster. "They'll die," he promised. "Now forget about hanging them." The vaqueros had crowded around, some holding the reins of their horses, others already in the saddle.

"I personally will avenge Sanchez," he told them, "for he was my friend."

For a moment they were silent, then Monjosa said, "We will wait and see."

Galvan felt angered and hurt at the suspicion he saw in the eyes of these men who had ridden so long for the Angle Iron. Some of them carried the body of the segundo into the bunkhouse. At least Sanchez was unmarried, Galvan reflected bitterly. There would be no widow or *niños* looking at Mike Galvan with accusing eyes.

A funnel of yellow dust rising against the sky caught Galvan's eye. He watched it until he saw a team and a buggy emerge from the cloud; on the seat were a man and woman. Suddenly he wanted to laugh, not because he found humor in seeing Kephart in the buggy with Lorene, but because it occurred to him that it is folly for a man to plan his life. For already he guessed the import of the sudden appearance of the pair.

"No trouble, now," Galvan warned his men, for the arrival of the man who had brought Rivers and Oakum to this country could produce violence.

Silently the vaqueros trooped to their quarters. Galvan was standing in front of the bunkhouse when Kephart wheeled the buggy to the rail and stepped down. He wore an expensive black suit, not shiny from wear as was Bellarmine's. Lorene had a new bonnet with a feather in it. Her pretty face was flushed and there seemed to be a new shyness about her as Kephart helped her to the ground.

Kephart removed his hat. His hair had been cut short but his sideburns were still thick on either side of his heavily tanned face. He smiled, showing his white teeth. "Your crew taking a holiday, Galvan?" he asked, looking around the empty yard with exaggerated curiosity.

Lorene said, blushing, "Let's not discuss business." She waited a moment, then said, "Shall I tell him, Burke?"

Galvan said stiffly. "I can guess."

Lorene extended her left hand so he could see the wide gold ring on her second finger. "We were married in Austin."

LIFE had not been easy for Galvan. At ten he was doing a man's work and on his twelfth birthday he rode with a crew into the brush and because he was inexperienced his clothing was torn from his back before the day was half over. He had been bred in a tough country where death was always at hand. Therefore he had steeled himself to shock. He said, Congratulations, Lorene." He did not look at Kephart. "You could have told me you planned this."

"But I didn't plan it," Lorene said, her eyes wide with innocence. "Really, Mike—" She bit her lip. "I mean Galvan. Burke thinks I shouldn't call you by your first name. Not in front of the men, at any rate."

"You've got to maintain discipline," Kephart said smiling.

Galvan started to turn away, but Lorene said, "I had no thought of marriage when I went to Austin to visit my aunt. But it just so happened that Burke was in Austin at the same time. We met accidentally and—"

"You took the stage from Zelda's," Galvan said. "I imagine Kephart learned soon enough from his friends there that you planned to visit Austin."

"And why would I know that?" Kephart said, losing some of his smile but none of his arrogance.

"There's a new outfit hanging around Zelda's," Galvan said. "They ride Chainlink horses and so do you. Chainlink is in West Texas. I hear you hail from that part of the country."

Kephart gave him a black look. "What if I do?"

"This bunch probably passed the word to you that Lorene went to Austin, so you headed for there yourself—"

A tenseness built up between the two men. Lorene suddenly thrust herself in front of Galvan. "I want you and Burke to be friends, Mike."

"You were told not to call me Mike," he reminded her.

She ignored him. Her pretty face seemed animated as if with her smile she had solved all problems. "You're to stay on as foreman. Burke and I want to travel later on and we'll feel that the ranch is safe if it's in your hands."

Kephart was looking around the yard. "Can't you get somebody to put up this buggy, Galvan?"

"The men are inside," Galvan said, "because I ordered it."

Lorene looked concerned. "Has something happened?"

"Sanchez is dead."

HER mouth opened. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Did he die in the brush like Guiterrez?"

Galvan shook his head and looked across her shoulder at Kephart. "He was shot to pieces. He managed to get back here to tell me who did it."

Kephart's shoulders shrugged under his expensive coat. "Mexicans are always fighting. They're a quarrelsome breed. I've been telling Lorene they should be replaced by Americans." He gave Galvan a mocking smile. "With your approval, of course."

Lorene lifted a small hand to silence him, then turned back to Galvan. "Who killed Sanchez?"

"Rivers and Oakum."

A quiet settled over the yard. Lorene took a backward step to stand beside her new husband. There was uncertainty in her and also a faint terror. She did not understand this country. Galvan knew what she was thinking: how could this glorious moment of introducing her new husband be shattered by the death of her segundo? It wasn't fair, her eyes seemed to say.

She looked up at Kephart. "Why would they kill Sanchez?"

Kephart seemed in deep thought. "I know they wouldn't do it deliberately. Mexicans are volatile. I imagine Sanchez was laying for them, probably still angered that you didn't believe his story about the fight at the windmill—"

Galvan said, "You know that's not true."

Burke Kephart's face darkened. "That's the same as calling me a liar."

"Is it?"

"Please!" Lorene cried, and pushed a trembling hand against her pinned-up hair. "I—I don't want you two to quarrel. There must be some explanation as to why Sanchez died." Her eyes were imploring as she looked at Galvan. "Burke might be right. I don't think Rivers or Oakum would deliberately shoot a man."

Galvan said, "It's time you learned that this isn't Chicago, Lorene. This is Texas."

Kephart said quietly, "What do you plan to do about this, Galvan?"

"I'm riding to Alto!"

Lorene's face whitened. "No, Mike—"

"I'm going to hunt down Rivers and Oakum and kill them!"

Vaqueros watching from the windows now drifted to the yard and stood watching the new husband of the Señora.

Lorene pulled at Galvan's shirtsleeve. "Murdering two men won't solve anything, Mike." But he ignored her and started across the yard. Then she cried, "If you do this, Mike, don't come back to Angle Iron!"

HE TURNED and faced her, tall and black-haired, his thumbs hooked in the belt that sloped across one hip. "Do you mean that, Lorene?" he asked quietly.

"Yes!" She was weeping and her voice wavered. "I won't condone murder!"

Without replying he went into his quarters and got his few belongings, including his money from the safe. In fifteen minutes he was ready to ride. He was not surprised that the vaqueros were mounted, grimly looking at the man and woman who watched them from the shadowed veranda. In a few moments the wives and children emerged from the married quarters. Galvan had two wagons hitched up. Personal belongings were loaded. Then the women and their children clambered aboard the wagons.

The cavalcade moved slowly across the yard. Galvan was the last to go. He rode past the house, not looking at Lorene. Kephart said, "Those are Angle Iron wagons, Galvan!"

"Your new crew can pick them up in Alto," Galvan said without turning his head.

Then he spurred to catch up to Monjosa, who rode at the head of the column. "I have nothing to offer you," Galvan said. "You should not have left good jobs because of me."

Monjosa only grunted. "You say you will avenge Sanchez. You are our amigo. If you need us we will come."

Galvan forced a smile. "*Vaya con Dios!*

Then Monjosa said in Spanish, "The Señora will find no happiness with this man. We should pity her, for she is after all only a foolish woman."

Because outside of himself Ruel Bellarmine would be the most concerned about Lorene's new status, Galvan took a trail that had been hacked through the brush last summer with machetes and even now was starting to grow over. As he rode he could hear an occasional ladino disturbed by his presence go crashing off in the brush. The heat and the silence was oppressing.

In mid-afternoon he came to Bellarmine's house. Bellarmine's 77 outfit had four riders. They were old and of little use in running the ranch. They had an old man's concern for life and limb and therefore were of little value in the brush.

Ben Sampson, a stooped gray-bearded man, acted as Bellarmine's foreman. He came out of the bunkhouse, a mud-walled building that had been built to hold twenty men.

"What you doing over this way?" he asked and took Galvan's horse.

"Bellarmine around?"

"Other side of the house," Ben Sampson said. "How's Mrs. Ellender?"

"She's no longer Mrs. Ellender. She married Burke Kephart in Austin."

Ben Sampson's mouth opened and a trickle of tobacco juice dripped through his whiskers. "The hell you say," he exclaimed and looked anxiously at the house. "The boss won't be happy to hear that."

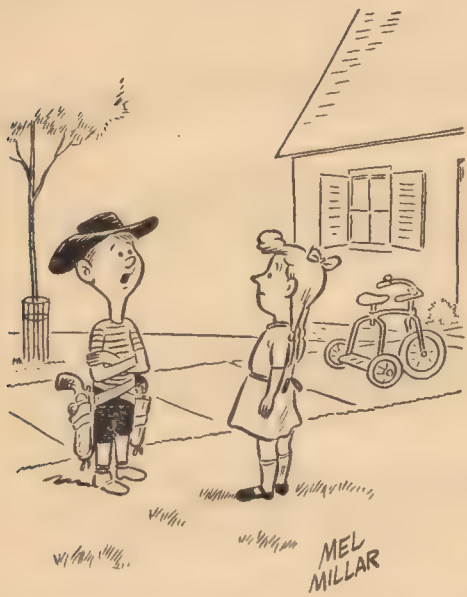
Galvan found Bellarmine reading a book on the shady side of the house. When he saw the slender, aristocratic rancher he thought of the things the man and Lorene had in common.

Bellarmine's smile of welcome was genuine. Today he did not wear his shiny black suit, but a wool shirt and black pants. His graying hair was carefully brushed back from his temples. Galvan, as he had so many times, was struck with the incongruity of this man trying to make a living from a brasada ranch. He and Lorene were not for this country. There was no place for books and the niceties of life.

BELLARMINE led him into the house and poured drinks from a decanter he had taken from a polished sideboard, the only piece of furniture he had brought from the south. The rest of the room was furnished with a long plank table, benches and half a dozen leather bottomed chairs.

"I'm glad you came, Mike," Bellarmine said. "Lorene will be coming home soon and we've got to map our strategy."

Galvan took the glass and drained it.



"My six-shooters are falsies, too"

Bellarmine said, "When you and Lorene are married—"

Galvan told him about Lorene's marriage to Kephart.

For a long moment Bellarmine stared through the open doorway where Ben Sampson was mending a harness in front of the bunkhouse.

"Kephart obviously planned the whole thing," Bellarmine said heavily.

"But Lorene thinks their meeting in Austin was accidental."

"What is Kephart after?" Bellarmine said, genuinely puzzled.

"A good-looking widow, a sizeable ranch. It all adds up to something worth gambling for." Galvan put a hand on Bellarmine's arm. "I wanted you to hear it from me. If I were you I'd take steps to protect myself."

"You mean the lease money?"

"I've got a hunch Kephart will ask for it."

"Maybe you'll have some influence with Lorene," Bellarmine said with a faint smile.

"I've been fired."

Bellarmine was astounded. "That was a cruel thing for Lorene to do."

"Sanchez is dead. Rivers and Oakum murdered him. I told Lorene I was going to hunt them down. And she said if I did I wasn't to come back to Angle Iron."

Bellarmine showed a genuine concern. "I suppose Kephart will be sending his two gunhands after me."

"Sleep with a gun under your pillow, Ruel."

"I suppose it's either fight or get out of the country."

"That's about it."

Ruel Bellarmine said, "Ride into Alto with me, Mike."

Galvan shook his head. "I've got a job to do. And if you're smart you'll stay sober." He knew what Bellarmine's going to Alto meant. He'd stay at O'Hearn's and drink himself into a stupor or until O'Hearn cut off his credit. The man was a fool, Galvan thought, and scared white because everything he had left in the world was out there in the brush. And the man had neither the money nor the guts to capitalize on those cattle. If Kephart pressed his demands for the lease money, Bellarmine was through.

When Galvan stepped to the door, Bellarmine said, "I liked Sanchez. Let me help you find Rivers and Oakum."

Galvan said from the doorway, "This is my job." He looked at the shadows lengthening across the yard. "And I'd better be getting at it."

THAT night Galvan slept in the brush. Early in the morning he was heading for Zelda's and when he reached the

place he saw no horses at the rack. He loosened his gun and entered.

The one-eyed Amberling was dozing behind his bar on a stool. The sound of footsteps caused him to look up. When he saw it was Galvan he looked surprised and a little wary. "What you drinking?" he asked.

"Nothing. What happened to the bunch who were in here the other day?"

Today Amberling wore a shirt, but his dirty underwear still showed through the unbuttoned front of it. "I don't keep track of my customers," Amberling said.

Galvan drew his gun and balanced it over the lip of the bar. The saloonman looked at the gun and then at Galvan's face. For a moment he seemed undecided about something. Then he ran a hand nervously along the seam of his dirty pants.

Galvan said, "If you've got a gun behind the bar, don't try for it!"

Amberling looked pale around the mouth. "What's the idea of holding me up? You want my money?"

"What makes you ask that?"

Amberling shrugged. "You probably need a stake. You ain't with Angle Iron no more."

Galvan gave him a tight smile. "How do you know that?"

"Burt Dattig told me. He pulled out with his boys about an hour ago."

"They drawing pay from Anglé Iron now?" Galvan asked.

"Yeah."

"What about Rivers and Oakum?"

Amberling grew sullen again as he said, "Don't know nothing about them."

Galvan cocked the revolver. "I haven't time to fool with you."

Amberling wet his lips. "You figure to put a bullet in me?"

"If I have to. Where can I find Rivers and Oakum?"

Perspiration broke out on Amberling's forehead. "I don't know where they are."

"I won't ask you again," Galvan said and stepped around the end of the bar and rammed the gun against Amberling's side.

"They're out in the brush someplace," Amberling said, fixing his one good eye on Galvan. "But I don't know where. Kephart said they was to keep out of sight till this business about Sanchez blows over."

Galvan looked at the thin, perspiring face, sensing that the man was telling the truth. He holstered the gun. Finding two men holed up in the brush would be the same as trying to find a two-bit piece at the bottom of the gulf.

But he decided to try. For the rest of the day he searched those spots where it was possible for men unfamiliar with the brush to hide out. They would have to be somewhere near one of the roads, or main trails. Otherwise, without a superior knowledge of the vast and deadly jungle, they would become hopelessly lost. Toward nightfall he scanned the horizon, hoping to see a thin telltale thread of smoke that would indicate an evening fire. But nothing marred the clear sky.

On the third day he was working near the southern edge of Bellarmine's lease when he saw a rider emerge from the brush and start down the Alto road. It was the albino, Jody Oakum. He jerked free his Winchester and rode up behind the man.

OAKUM heard him coming, turned in the saddle. When he saw the rifle and the man who held it, he sat stiffly with no emotion showing on his pale face.

Galvan swung his gray alongside Oakum's chestnut. "You've got a gun in your belt," Galvan said, "use it!"

Oakum's white hair hung in a ragged line below the brim of his hat. He shook his head. "You ain't giving me much chance, Galvan, you holding a rifle."

Galvan said thinly, "About as much chance as you gave Luis Sanchez."

"He was a Mex. I'm a white man."

For a moment Galvan was tempted to shoot him out of the saddle. Then he deliberately booted the rifle. "You don't de-

serve it, but I'll give you a chance."

"You got a tough rep, Galvan," Oakum whined. "If I try and draw on you I'll end up dead."

"Pull your gun!"

Stubbornly Oakum refused. He sat his saddle, reins looped over the saddle horn and his thin arms folded across his chest.

Galvan cursed him, called him every foul name he could lay tongue to, but still Oakum refused to be goaded into grabbing for the gun at his belt.

Disgusted, Galvan rode closer and jerked out the man's revolver and rifle and threw them into the brush. "Where's Rivers?"

"He pulled out," Oakum said.

"Where to?"

"I dunno. Kephart gave him some money. I figure he's gone back to Kansas. He hails from there."

Suddenly Galvan felt a tremor along his spine, knowing he had been overly eager when he spotted Oakum. Something was wrong here. He searched the brush with his eyes and the flats to the south. Nothing moved. There was no sound. The air was heavy and still.

He looked at Oakum and said, "Because you're so gutless I'm going to do something I swore I'd never do."

Oakum regarded him thinly. "What's that?"

"I'm going to turn you over to the deputy at Rio. If you won't fight I can't kill you. But you deserve to hang—"

A faint clicking sound behind him caused Galvan to turn his head. He knew what the sound was; the sliding bolt of a rifle. At the edge of the brush he saw Kephart holding a rifle. Ten feet to his right was Rivers, looming big and mean. His left arm was still bandaged but it was no longer held in a sling. With his good hand he gripped a carbine. Both men were afoot and Galvan realized he had foolishly walked into a trap. They had spotted him in the brush and had put Oakum in plain sight as a decoy to draw Galvan into a position where they could get the drop on him with a minimum of risk to themselves.

"Step down, Galvan!" Kephart said easily. "Make a move toward your gun and I'll drop you."

Oakum had dismounted, picked up his revolver and rifle and then boarded his horse again. He kept at Galvan's back, holding a gun on him. Rivers had come in from an angle so that now they had him completely boxed.

Galvan was aware of a dryness in his throat. He swung down facing Kephart. Rivers jerked free Galvan's revolver and threw it across the road. Then he struck Galvan a savage blow behind the ear that drove him to his knees. When Rivers stepped forward to kick Galvan in the head, Kephart waved him away.

SLOWLY Galvan got to his feet. Pain was a cruel barb behind his eyes. In a moment he was able to focus his gaze on the three men, Oakum sitting his saddle, hat back on his white head, grinning. Kephart wore an expensive whipcord shirt and dark pants. He was well scrubbed and freshly shaved. Rivers stood with his thick legs apart, glowering.

"We have a new rule at the Angle Iron," Kephart said with a faint smile.

"I suppose you have a lot of rules," Galvan said, "now that you've taken over."

Kephart nodded. "But this rule concerns you at the moment. We regard all trespassers as potential rustlers."

Galvan tried to laugh. The back of his shirt was wet. Nobody's trespassing."

"You're on Angle Iron property," Kephart said.

"This is Bellarmine's lease," Galvan told him.

"It's the same thing as Angle Iron. Bellarmine is getting off."

Galvan tried to stall for time, to figure some way of getting free of these men. He had been so anxious to grab Oakum that he had allowed them to trap him. Now he would have to use his wits to escape the trap.

" Lorene won't let you put Bellarmine off the lease."

"She'll see things my way." He laughed. "You're quite a fellow, Galvan. I warned

my wife that you were a smooth one. She'll probably be upset when she learns we hanged you. To spare her feelings I'll try and keep the news from her as long as possible."

Galvan saw Mart Rivers with a saddle rope in his hands.

"I'm not a rustler," Galvan said, taking a backward step, but Rivers threw a loop over his head, drew the noose tight.

"I believe you're a rustler all right," Kephart said, still in that easy tone. A butchered Angle Iron steer was found on the road a few days ago. Naturally I was concerned when I heard about it."

"Ask the new bunch you've got at the ranch. They can tell you about the steer."

Kephart only smiled and pointed to a stout mesquite near the road. "That ought to serve our purpose."

Rivers yanked cruelly on the rope and Galvan was almost pulled off his feet. He put both hands on the rope so as to ease the pressure against his throat. Galvan felt perspiration run down the channel between his shoulder blades. Many times he had considered the prospect of dying, but not with a rope around his neck.

He was watching Rivers, who kept hanging onto the end of the rope with both hands, forcing him to stumble over the uneven ground in front of the mesquite. If he could get close enough to get his hands on the gun at Rivers' belt—

So intent were the three men on the prospect of hanging Galvan that they did not see Bellarmine ride suddenly out of the brush. The Southerner weaved in the saddle. His eyes were bloodshot and his thin face showed the strain of a prolonged drunk. His cheeks were unshaven and his clothes were dirty.

He laid a rifle across the saddle, pointed it at Kephart. He had appeared so suddenly that the trio were caught flat-footed. "Step away from Galvan!" Bellarmine ordered Rivers. "If you don't I'll put a bullet in Kephart."

Jody Oakum began to curse, but Kephart gave a warning shake of his head, as if to tell the albino not to do anything rash. Rivers still gripped the rope in his big hands as if reluctant to let it go. He looked at Kephart as if for some sort of signal.

Galvan tried to step back, but the noose was tight about his neck and he could not throw it off as long as Rivers held onto the rope.

"Keep your rifle on Kephart," Galvan warned Bellarmine. "He'll risk the lives of his men, but he won't risk his own."

"I'll watch him," Bellarmine said, and seemed to slump further forward in the saddle. He was trembling.

Some of the color had left Kephart's face, but he seemed to have retained all of his confidence. "You're drunk, Bellarmine."

His voice seemed to rouse Bellarmine. "Not too drunk to miss you."

"I wonder," Kephart murmured and seemed to be considering a possibility.

Galvan tensed. He stepped in close to Rivers, intending to get the man's belted revolver, but Rivers moved away, still gripping the rope. From the tail of his eye, Galvan saw Oakum edging his horse to one side so as to get a clear shot at Bellarmine.

"Watch Oakum!" Galvan cried and suddenly yanked hard on the rope, throwing Rivers off balance. The big man regained his feet, tried to draw his gun. Galvan closed with him and rammed the point of an elbow in the V of his rib box. Rivers doubled up.

A rifle crashed and Oakum's horse pitched over, throwing Oakum heavily to the ground.

Oakum picked himself up and stood looking at his dead horse. Then he looked at Bellarmine. "There'll be another day," he said.

Kephart said, "I'll give you some advice. "Get out of the country—both of you!"

"You'd better take a little of that advice," Galvan said, cocking the revolver he had taken from Rivers.

WHEN they had ridden off, Oakum behind Rivers on the latter's already burdened horse, Galvan said, "I

should think of something original, Ruel, to show you that I really appreciate you saving my life. But about all I can say is thanks."

Bellarmine had booted the rifle. He took a bottle from his saddlebags and had a long drink. The whiskey seemed to steady him. "I saw them get the drop on you," he said tonelessly. "I was coming back from Alto." He gave Galvan a rueful smile. "I've been at O'Hearn's."

"I'm glad you were steady enough to hold that rifle." He brushed a shirtsleeve across his damp forehead.

When Galvan was mounted, Bellarmine said, watching him, "What are your plans, Mike?"

Galvan shrugged. The near hanging had unnerved him. He said, "Plans are something I don't have at the moment. Ruel."

Bellarmine studied him a moment. then said, "I've got a hunch you're going to clear out, Mike. That this part of Texas has seen the last of you."

"That's possible," Galvan admitted, and watched Bellarmine turn his horse up the trail that led to his 77 headquarters. For a moment Galvan was tempted to follow, for he sensed Bellarmine was disappointed in him. Instead, he turned his horse along the Alto road, arriving in town after dark.

As with most men who have faced death and lived, he found it hard to realize that save for the sudden appearance of Ruel Bellarmine, he would not be seeing Alto tonight, or anything else for that matter. He turned his horse in at the stable and saw that Humphrey, the hostler had a raw wound across one side of his face.

"Mule kick you?" Galvan asked.

Humphrey clenched his fists. "Oakum hit me with his gun."

Sensing Humphrey had more to tell, Galvan swung down. "He must have had a reason for hitting you."

"I always liked Luis Sanchez," Humphrey said. "When I seen Oakum and Rivers start off after him I never figured they meant to kill him."

Galvan watched the thin-faced hostler a moment, sensing a vague triumph. He had been wondering how, if he was lucky enough to kill Oakum and Rivers, he could explain it to the law. The word of a Mexican would probably not be accepted even though the vaqueros had heard Sanchez name the men who had shot him. But Humphrey could swear that he saw the pair trail the Angle Iron segundo

"Maybe I'll get you to tell your story to the law," Galvan said, and was aware of Humphrey's instant fright.

"Not unless they're dead or locked up ready to hang."

O'HEARN greeted Galvan by setting out a bottle. The saloonman seemed doleful. He had heard about Galvan severing connections with the Angle Iron. "I heard Kephart has a fondness for Zelda's. Reckon the Angle Iron will do most of their drinking over there."

"You didn't expect anything to be easy, did you, O'Hearn? At least not in Texas."

O'Hearn shrugged. "Bellarmine was in here for two days. Drunk up most of my good bourbon. Did you meet him on the road?"

"Yeah," Galvan said.

O'Hearn said, "Saw Cora Desmond yesterday. She asked about you."

Galvan studied his drink. The last time he had talked with Cora he sensed she was angry with him. Over the possibility of his marrying Lorene.

Suddenly he wanted to see Cora, and moved along the street in the darkness, being stopped three times in the single business block by men who wanted to hear the true story of Lorene marrying Burke Kephart and why Galvan had left Angle Iron.

It was a half hour before Galvan reached the house where Cora roomed with the Johnson family. Because the night was sultry, he found her on the

porch where lamplight spilled over her face from a front window. She must have been on the verge of retiring, for she had taken down her long chestnut hair and now it hung loosely about her shoulders. She held the pins in her hand.

"Hello, Mike," she said, and watched him.

He rolled a cigarette, aware of an unaccustomed wall of tension between himself and this girl he had known for so long.

"Just what are your plans now, Mike?"

"Should I have plans?" Her manner irritated him. It was the second time this day he had been asked about plans. First Bellarmine and now Cora.

"I suppose you'll be leaving now that Kephart beat you to Lorene."

Galvan struck a match, lighted his cigarette. "Just what would you have thought of me if I'd married her?"

"The same as I'd think of any fortune hunter."

He tried to weigh her voice, was it scornful or merely teasing? Then he saw her smile and knew the tension had been eased. He moved nearer and said, "That's the trouble with you schoolteachers. Your world is black or white. No off shades."

"I would never have thought you all black," she said, looking down at the pins she had dropped in her lap. "Even though I tried." She met his eyes then. "Lorene will be in town tomorrow to pick up the new dress Mrs. Boulton is making for her. Will you feel an ache in your heart if you should meet?"

Galvan shook his head. Suddenly he saw himself objectively. What did he owe Monjosa? It had been bravado in front of the vaqueros to say he would hunt down Oakum and Rivers and endanger his own life. The pair should be turned over to the law, he decided, and properly hanged.

"I'm pulling up stakes here, Cora," he said, hearing her sharp intake of breath. "I'll tell the deputy at Rio all about Oakum and Rivers. He can come back and get them. With a posse he won't have too much trouble."

"I suppose not." The old deadness was back in her voice.

He leaned close, catching the scent of her; it reminded him of the perfume of huisache blossoms in the brush. "Do you like teaching school?"

"I like children. I suppose that compensates."

"You don't want to teach for the rest of your life?"

AS SHE stared at him somebody down the block began picking out a tune on a mandolin. "I want a family of my own," she said. "Now I have many families. My responsibility but not mine." She seemed about to say more, then bit her lip.

"Would you go away with me—"

She straightened in her chair. "A drunken hardware drummer asked me that one night. I slapped his face."

"I mean marriage, Cora." He made a vague gesture. "When I get settled in Arizona I'll send for you."

Cora rose from her chair, saying stiffly, "I wish you luck, Mike, but don't send for me."

He looked at her, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Because Lorene turned you down, you come to me."

"I never asked her to marry me."

"But you were going to. Only Kephart got there first."

He said angrily, "With Lorene it was different."

"I can see that," she said bitterly. "Lorene has the Angle Iron."

"We've always been friends. There's no reason for you to act like this."

She turned and stared up the dusty street toward the glowing lights of O'Hearn's Saloon. "It's not only because of Lorene," she said. "But you're cutting loose from a responsibility here."

"I got fired," he reminded her.

"I'm not talking about Angle Iron. I'm talking about Luis Sanchez. Oh, I know all about it. Monjosa's sister is my friend. She told me." Cora looked at him closely. "You told Monjosa you'd personally avenge Sanchez. I believe as you do now, that the law should handle it. But if you quit the country Oakum and Rivers can never be convicted."

"Humphrey can be a witness."

"That stableman is unreliable. He'll testify only if it suits his purpose."

When he tried to catch her hands she stepped away from him.

"There's also Bellarmine," Cora said. "You know Kephart will push him off the lease. He was Matt Ellender's best friend. You should help him."

"Maybe I've decided to live my own life for a change," he said savagely.

"And leave the country without attempting to help Bellarmine? Is that what you call living your own life?" When he made no reply, she said, her tone softer, "You can do a lot for this country, Mike. You've read a lot and you have an education. Not much, but better than most men in these parts. Put it to some use."

"Why should I?" he asked, angered at her tone.

She seemed hurt, for she went into the house without telling him good night.

HE WENT back to O'Hearn's, got a bottle and played some poker. He lost eighteen dollars and by midnight was half drunk. O'Hearn let him spend the night on a cot in the office. In the morning O'Hearn cooked him some breakfast and then Galvan made ready to ride. He

[*Turn page*]

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told O'Hearn about the stableman seeing Rivers and Oakum trail Sanchez out of town on the day the Mexican was killed. "I'll send the deputy over," Galvan said. "Help him all you can."

"Where you figure to go, Mike?"

"Arizona."

"Why there?"

"It's just a place on the map. It's as good as any other." He started out the door just as Bellarmine entered. The Southerner still looked shaken from his drunk, but he had shaved and put on a clean shirt. O'Hearn started to set out a bottle, but Bellarmine shook his head. There was a hunger in his eyes, however, as he stared at the bottle.

He called Galvan over to one of the gaming tables where they sat down. "It's happened," Bellarmine said. "A couple of new Angle Iron riders came over this morning with a letter from Kephart."

"So he's kicking you off."

"I've got thirty days to get the lease money or he'll put a lien against my herd. He'll kick me off and take over my cattle."

Galvan lighted a cigarette, seeing that his hand trembled slightly, which was unusual, for he prided himself on steady nerves.

"Kephart's out to make himself a big man in this country, Mike. And he's starting with me."

Galvan looked into the haggard, bloodshot eyes. "He started with the Angle Iron," Galvan reminded him. "He got that by marrying Lorene. Now he'll grab your cows and then look around for something else."

Bellarmine looked hopeless. "Maybe I could borrow money—"

"Nobody will loan money on cattle they can't see. And yours are scattered to hell and gone in the brush."

"And I would have to get a crew to drive them out." For several moments he watched Galvan as if waiting for him to speak. And he would not mention the subject that lay between them, for he had pride. Then he stepped across to the bar and said to O'Hearn, "I believe I will have that drink."

Galvan spent a few bad moments. Never had a man looked at him with such accusing eyes. Bellarmine had saved his life, but the man's pride would not let him ask a favor. Suddenly Galvan reached a decision. It would mean staying in town another day even though he hated the thought. He wanted to get away to forget Cora and Lorene and all that had happened here. But he owed a debt to Bellarmine.

He moved to the bar, remembering Cora had said Lorene would be in town today. "I'll have a talk with Lorene. She'll listen to reason."

Bellarmine looked skeptical. "I'm afraid Kephart has her under his thumb."

"It's worth a try. It's the least I can do."

Bellarmine said after a moment, "Yes, it's the least you can do." He pushed the bottle back at O'Hearn and started for the door. "I'll be at the hotel. I'm going to get some sleep."

WHEN Galvan saw Lorene's buggy cut over from the main street, he stepped into her view and held up his hand. She halted the team, watching him with a strained uncertain look in her eyes. He removed his hat.

"I just wanted you to know," he told her, "that what happened the other day is for the best. I hold no grudge against you."

She seemed to find comfort in his words, for she relaxed against the seat. "I'm glad to hear you say that. We were friends for so long." Then she added almost wistfully, "I—I wish you could come back to Angle Iron—"

"You'll be better off with things as they are."

Today she wore a green dress and her hair was pinned up. Her face was flushed and she seemed like a young girl. Galvan wondered if all brides had this blushing

excitement in their faces. Whatever else he might be Kephart evidently had made Lorene happy.

"I've got a favor to ask," he said, and noted that she was instantly on her guard.

"If it's about Sanchez, I want to tell you now that I can't take sides. You tell one story and Oakum and Rivers tell another. Burke has asked me to reserve judgment until I know the truth." She looked at him as if trying to make him understand. "After all, you know how these Mexicans are."

He had a hard time controlling himself. After a moment he said, "It has nothing to do with Sanchez. It's Bellarmine." Then he told her about the letter Kephart had sent, giving Bellarmine thirty days to pay up the delinquent lease money or have his herd attached.

"I didn't know about that," Lorene said, and he believed her.

"Bellarmine was Matt's best friend. You owe that much to Matt's memory."

She seemed undecided, her pretty face losing some of its color.

"If Kephart pushes too hard," Galvan warned, "All hell is liable to bust loose."

She frowned, obviously trying to grasp a situation she knew nothing about. But the tone of Galvan's voice and his dire prediction sobered her. "Burke is all right once you get to know him," she said. "He's just overly ambitious. I'll talk him out of doing this to Bellarmine. He'll understand once I present the facts."

"You'll save a lot of trouble for this country if you do," Galvan said and stepped back from the buggy.

She lifted the reins. "Forgive me for talking to you the way I did the other day at the ranch. I—"

"Take care of the Bellarmine deal," he said, "and that will even us up."

She gave him a warm smile and drove down the street and angled the buggy in at the rail in front of Mrs. Boulton's sign: Dressmaking, Millinery.

Galvan went back to the hotel to tell Bellarmine the good news, finding the man slumped in a leather chair on the veranda. When Galvan related his conversation with Lorene, Bellarmine's face brightened.

"I don't honestly think she knew Kephart had given you the deadline to pay up the lease."

Bellarmine clenched his fist. "Sometimes when I think of that fine woman with a scoundrel like Kephart—" He could not finish the sentence. "I wonder how long it will take her to find out what he's really like?"

When Bellarmine thanked him and entered the hotel Galvan wondered how much he really owed the man for saving his neck. Then he thought ruefully, How much is your life worth, Galvan? Whatever the price, that's what you owe Bellarmine.

He decided to wait around and see what happened when Lorene had the talk with her husband.

TIME lay heavily on his hands, for he was a man used to an active day. He drank too much and played too much poker. But his luck was better. He won eleven dollars in a game at O'Hearn's.

A man standing by the window said, "Monjosa and some of your old Angle Iron bunch just rode in, Galvan."

Galvan felt a warm glow spread through him. He hadn't seen his vaqueros since they left Angle Iron. "Set out a drink for them," he told O'Hearn.

The bald saloonman said, "They probably won't come in here. They don't feel too kindly toward some of us Americans after what happened to Sanchez."

Galvan swore softly, for the feeling of guilt was in him again. He had been about to ride away without avenging the death of his friend. He started to get out of his chair and go and see Monjosa, but the men in the poker game with him were impatient to get on with it. He decided to wait to see if perhaps Monjosa might not come to O'Hearn's after all. He tried to concentrate on the cards, but a voice at the back of his mind kept hammering, "You've quit on your friends, Galvan . . ."

Lew Humphrey was raking the runway in the stable when he saw Jody Oakum

ride through the rear door and step down from a gray.

It took Humphrey a moment to overcome his surprise. Then he smiled archly so that the gash on his face puckered up. He winced from the hurt of it.

Oakum said, "Grain my horse." And when Humphrey was slow in taking the reins, the albino snarled, "I'll lay open the other side of your face if you don't move."

"Sure, Jody," Humphrey said.

"Who's in town?" Oakum demanded when Humphrey started to put the gray in a stall.

Humphrey shrugged, his mind spinning with a wild plan. "Nobody important."

"Seen Mike Galvan?" Oakum asked thinly.

"Not for two or three days," Humphrey said.

"If you lie to me," Oakum warned, "you'll wish you'd been stomped the day you was born."

Humphrey made a pretense of rubbing down the horse. When Oakum did not leave the stable, he grew impatient.

"Got a drink in the office?" Oakum demanded.

Humphrey thought quickly. Mike Galvan was down at O'Hearn's playing cards. Humphrey had seen him there not half an hour ago. And Galvan's horse was in a stall so it meant Galvan was still in town. "Just killed the bottle a little while ago," Humphrey said. "Go down to O'Hearn's and get a bottle. I'll pay half."

Oakum started for the door, then looked around, his pale eyes suspicious. "Why for you want me to go down to O'Hearn's?"

"Hell, no reason, Jody."

"Come to think of it," Oakum drawled, "it's the first time you ever offered to chip in on a bottle."

Humphrey felt desperate. "I—I won a little money at monte last night."

Oakum suddenly stepped into the small stable office and jerked open a desk drawer. He held up a bottle half full of whisky. Oakum took a big drink, then yelled through the doorway, "You lying son! I ought to bust your head!"

Humphrey's narrow face went white and the wound on his cheek began to pain him. "Guess I forgot about the bottle," he said lamely.

"Yeah, you sure did." Oakum dropped into a swivel chair and put his feet on the desk. He took off his hat and his white hair looked ghostly in the shadowed stable office. "I'm waiting for Rivers and some of the Angle Iron bunch to ride in. If they come let 'em know where I am."

Oakum took another drink, put his hat over his eyes and, extending a foot, kicked the door shut.

Humphrey waited a moment. He thought of getting a message to Mike Galvan that would bring the ex-Angle Iron ramrod to the stable. But Oakum might be lucky here facing only one man. Humphrey knew he was as good as dead if Oakum won, for the albino would smell a double cross.

A FEW minutes ago he had seen Monjosa, the horse breaker, and half a dozen vaqueros ride into Alto. They had gone down one of the side streets where Monjosa's sister lived.

A couple of Mexican kids had been playing in the alley beside the stable and Humphrey went quickly to see if they were still there. They were. He called over the older of the two, a thin boy with the right knee out of his pants. Quickly in Spanish Humphrey whispered a message, pressed a half-dollar into the boy's hand. The two youngsters scampered off down the alley.

Humphrey went back to working on Oakum's horse but his hands trembled so he could hardly hold a curry comb. Not five minutes later he heard the soft thud of hoofbeats in the thick alley dust. A half dozen grim-faced vaqueros, led by Monjosa, rode into the stable.

Monjosa dismounted warily. "*Donde esta Señor* Oakum?"

Humphrey jerked his head toward the office.

Monjosa looked that way, then whis-

pered, "Why for you send the kid to me?"

Humphrey touched the wicked gash on his face. "Oakum done that to me. Ain't that reason enough?"

Monjosa seemed satisfied. He drew his gun and the Mexicans crashed into the office behind him. Oakum came awake and tried to reach his revolver, but they were on him. They gripped him by the arms and jerked him to his feet. Oakum let out a scream of pure terror and Monjosa struck him in the face.

Down at O'Hearn's Galvan was just raking in a three dollar pot when he heard the piercing scream. It seemed to come from the stable. The men in the saloon tensed. Then O'Hearn said, "Probably a drunk," and the tension eased.

A premonition of danger upon him, Galvan left his chips on the table and hurried along the walk. Somehow he sensed that scream was tied in with the presence of Monjosa in town.

MEN gathered into a knot on the street were looking toward the stable at the far end of the block, but no one seemed interested. A man screaming in Alto meant little unless preceded or followed by a gunshot. And there had been no sound of guns.

Galvan, clenching a half-smoked cigar in his teeth, stepped into the big shadowed stable. For a moment he was blinded from the quick change of blazing sunlight to gloom so that he was unprepared when two men wedged him into a corner at gun point and removed his revolver. Gradually his vision cleared and he saw that they were two of his vaqueros. One of them was Fernando Alvarez. His gaze shifted and he saw Monjosa and four more of his old Angle Iron crew. A rope was thrown over a rafter and the noose was around the neck of Jody Oakum, who stood with hands and ankles tied, mute with terror.

Galvan said sharply, "Don't be a fool, Monjosa."

Monjosa shrugged. "I am sorry, amigo, but he must die."

"Turn him over to the law." Galvan's eyes searched for Humphrey, found him standing in the office doorway looking pale and shaken. "You'll testify against Oakum, won't you, Lew?"

But Humphrey seemed not to hear him, for he was staring at the stricken Oakum, grinning. "How you like it, Oakum?" he cried. "You won't lay a gun barrel on anybody else!"

Oakum began to weep. "It wasn't my idea to kill Sanchez," he said to Monjosa.

Humphrey gave a shrill laugh. "It was you. Don't blame it all on Rivers. He's likely guilty as hell, but it was you that seen Sanchez ride out of town."

Monjosa said to Oakum, "You murdered my friend." Then he nodded at the four vaqueros who held the end of the rope. They walked quickly across the stable with it, jerking Oakum into the air. They tied the rope to a post then stepped away and looked up at the struggling figure, no compassion on their dark faces.

"Cut him down!" Galvan cried, and started for Monjosa, but a gun was rammed against his back.

THEN he heard a woman scream and turned to see Cora Desmond, evidently on her way home from the school. When Monjosa saw who it was he told Galvan to go and comfort her, but to leave his gun behind. Galvan stepped to the street, held her.

"Some of the children are playing in the schoolyard," Cora said after a moment. "We must not let them see this, Mike."

"I'll help you," he said, knowing there was nothing he could now do about Oakum.

The scream of a woman was bringing a crowd. And now men crowded around the stable door, but no one offered to drive off the Mexicans and help the white man. In a few moments the shadows that had jerked back and forth across the stable floor were stilled. "We give him to you

now, Señores," Monjosa told the men in the doorway.

"He got what he deserved," one of the men said.

Monjosa and the vaqueros rode to the street. Monjosa took Galvan's revolver to the schoolyard where Galvan and Cora Desmond were talking to a group of children. Monjosa put the revolver on a stump by the gate. "I am sorry, amigo," he said again, then he rode away.

Mike Galvan looked bitter. "We'll see war in this country, as sure as there's a sun in the morning."

Cora touched his arm. "Thanks for helping me, Mike."

He turned, seeing her tall and proud, her hair combed back from her forehead and tied with a red ribbon. He had told the children a fool story about the Indians who used to live here. It had prevented them from seeing the thing down at the stable. They would hear about it soon enough, for news of a hanging would be spared no ears, young or old. But at least their dreams wouldn't be haunted by the sight of it. I've done one decent thing this day, Galvan thought.

He found Bellarmine on the hotel porch. The man had been upstairs asleep, but had been awakened by the commotion. Quickly Galvan told him what had happened. They were having an evening smoke on the hotel veranda when Lorene arrived in the buggy with her new husband and a crowd of Angle Iron riders. The crew was led by Mart Rivers and the red-bearded Burt Dattig.

Lorene climbed the porch steps. obviously angered. Her face was flushed, but not from pleasure as it had been the day she rode back from Austin with Burke Kephart.

GATHERED in doorways, watching the Angle Iron men, men were speculating on the reason for their presence here.

When Bellarmine started forward, Galvan said, "Let me handle it, Ruel."

Lorene crossed the porch, her hard heels rapping against the planks. "I want you to know, Mr. Galvan," she said, fury making her voice tremble, "that I've heard what happened to Jody Oakum."

Galvan had removed his hat and his black hair glistened in the fading sunlight that angled across the veranda. "I had nothing to do with hanging Oakum."

"I know better!"

"In fact, I tried to prevent what happened—"

"You lie!" Lorene cried. Her gaze shifted to Bellarmine, who stood beside his chair, looking utterly despondent. "I know now," Lorene went on angrily, "that both of you are working together. I tell you both, Galvan, Bellarmine, that I think the hanging of Oakum was the most despicable act that has ever been committed in this country."

"I don't condone lynching him," Galvan said quietly, "but after all, he was a murderer." He looked across the porch rail to the buggy where Kephart sat stiffly on the seat, the hot breeze flicking the ends of his long hair. He was smiling faintly. Behind him Mart Rivers sat with both hands gripping the saddlehorn. He glared at Galvan but kept his mouth shut.

"I came to tell you this," Lorene said. "Bellarmine's deadline is again in effect."

"That's not fair," Galvan said quickly. "He had nothing to do with it!"

Lorene gave him a fierce smile. "His deadline has been cut in half. If he hasn't paid up his lease money in two weeks my husband and I will go to the county seat and get a lien against his cattle!"

Bellarmine said to her in his soft voice, "The other day Oakum and Rivers and your husband were about to hang Galvan. How would you have felt about that, Mrs. Kephart?"

SHE looked at him a moment, then said, "I don't believe you." But there was a vague doubt in her voice, for Bellarmine might be many things but he was not a liar. She struggled a moment, then looked at her husband in the buggy. "Is Mr. Bellarmine speaking the truth?"

Kephart smiled. "Obviously not, otherwise Galvan wouldn't be standing on that

porch—alive."

Galvan said, "Bellarmine saved me from being hanged to a mesquite!"

Kephart stood up in the buggy, looking handsome and confident. "You're making irresponsible charges in the hope of turning my wife against me. But I think you've failed. She has complete confidence in my judgment."

Lorene moved slowly back to the buggy and when she was at the side of her husband again she seemed to regain her certainty of purpose. To Bellarmine, she said, "You have two weeks." Then she looked away as the buggy drove off, the Angle Iron riders, who obviously had been warned by Kephart against any sort of violence, strung out behind.

When the dust of their passing had faded, Galvan said, "The woman is a complete fool."

"She's a woman in love," Bellarmine said softly.

Galvan nodded, then said, "Will you split fifty-fifty on all your cattle we can get out of the brush?"

Bellarmine's mouth hung open. "I thought you were leaving Texas."

Galvan shook his head. "I've changed my mind."

Bellarmine was smiling now, no longer overcome with surprise. "There's a market for cattle in Abilene."

Galvan felt excited. "We'll drive a herd there. I'll get Monjosa and the vaqueros—"

They grinned at each other and shook hands in the darkness of the hotel veranda.

Galvan went to the stable for his horse. Lew Humphrey sat in his office holding a shotgun. He seemed frightened.

"If I were you, Lew," Galvan said, when he had paid the man for stabling the horse, "I'd get out of the country. Angle Iron is going to find out eventually that you sent for Monjosa and caused Oakum to be hanged."

"How did you know that?"

"I wasn't sure until now," Galvan said quietly.

He rode to the Johnson home where Cora roomed. The girl seemed pleased to see him. "You know Monjosa's sister," he told her. "Get a message to him through her, will you?"

"What is the message?" she asked gravely.

"Tell Monjosa to bring the old Angle Iron vaqueros to Bellarmine's ranch."

He saw the quick smile on her lips. "I'm glad you're not running out."

"So am I."

ON THE morning of the second day Monjosa and nine of the old Angle Iron vaqueros rode across Bellarmine's ranchyard. The horse breaker stepped down, tilting back his high-peaked hat so that the chin strap dug into his brown throat. He seemed wary. "You are angry with us, amigo?" he asked.

Galvan clapped him on an arm. "There is no anger between friends," he said in Spanish.

"But we take your gun. You do not wish us to hang that *cabron*. But we defy you."

"Can you bring back yesterday and live it again? Oakum is dead. Talk will not bring him back to life. I hope by now he is getting warmed in Hell's backyard."

The tension eased and the Mexicans squatted on their heels in the shade of the house and smoked corn husk *cigarros* and listened to Galvan's plan. He told them he and Bellarmine were partners. They would drive Bellarmine's ladinos from the brush and make a gather. They would drive the herd to Abilene. But there would be no wages until the herd was sold. Did they understand and would they be willing to gamble?

Fernando Alvarez seemed offended. The gray head said, "You were the friend of Luis Sanchez. You swore to kill those who murdered him and it was only our good fortune that we found Oakum before you did. So we ride with you."

Galvan met the man's eyes, inwardly feeling like a scoundrel. He had given his word to these Mexicans that he would

personally avenge the death of the segundo, yet he had been ready to leave the country without keeping his promise.

It was agreed that Bellarmine would stay at the ranch and get the gear and chuckwagon fixed up with the help of his four old riders.

At noon after a meal of frijoles y carne, Galvan led his vaqueros into the brush.

It was hard and dangerous work and the life of a brush rider was short unless the hand of his patron saint rested on his shoulder. They took their small Spanish ponies into the blackbrush, with the thorns reaching for horse and riders with spiked fingers to tear cloth and flesh. They shouted, "Ai-i-i-i-i-i," riding like demons, dodging through the heavy undergrowth in the hot, sticky hell of the Texas jungle, their ropes tied fast to the saddle horn. The big Chihuahua steers were fast and smart. Some of them had been in the brush five years without a branding iron laid on their tough hides. Their horns were saber sharp, and a twist of their big heads could rip open a horse or impale a man. On that first day they lost Fernando Alvarez.

Just before sundown Galvan was about to shout that it was enough for today, when he heard a tremendous crashing to his right. A red-eyed ladino bulled his way through the tricket, a noose caught over the immense spread of his horns. And in his wake rode Fernando Alvarez. He had lost his hat and long gray-streaked hair fell across his face so that he looked like a painting of an Aztec warrior Matt Ellender had purchased in Austin and hung over his fireplace.

"Cut him loose!" Galvan shouted. "Cut him loose!"

But Alvarez had pride. He rode with the fluid grace of the Mexican, his pony roaring in the wake of the big maddened steer. And the rope was tied fast to the saddlehorn. The pony's coat was smooth, the hair scraped off by the wicked brush.

Already Galvan could hear the crash of the other vaqueros, those not holding the first day's gather in the clearing three miles to the south. They came pounding up, sensing the tragedy that hung in the stifling ocean of brush.

Galvan jerked free his rifle and fired at the ladino, wanting to drop it with a bullet in the head. But the steer swerved and the shot was wasted. Then Alvarez and the steer disappeared into the thorny forest.

An agony of suspense tightened Galvan's throat as he spurred forward.

ALVAREZ maneuvered the crazy ladino into a clearing and Galvan saw him jerk back on the reins. The Spanish pony bravely settled its weight against the taut rope as if it could stop that twisting, volcanic mass of potential murder at the end of the rope.

Galvan knew that Alvarez would not shoot the steer. He would play out the grim game because he had missed his cast and roped the steer not by a leg so as to throw it, but around the horns.

Hardly had the pony reared back on the rope than the ladino whirled and charged. It crashed into the pony, a horn splintering the breastbone. As the Chihuahua steer pulled back from the dying horse, it turned on Alvarez, who had landed nimbly on the ground and was trying to maneuver the steer so it would be fouled up in the rope and snub itself against the trunk of a mesquite.

Galvan fired again, but the steer was a poor target. One moment he would see it, the next moment it would be hidden by the brush. He spurred on to the clearing, seeing Alvarez trying to reach the mesquite, but the ladino got there first. It caught him, flung him high. When the Mexican lay upon the ground it drove a horn through his back even as Galvan's three rifle bullets were in its body. Galvan fired a fourth time, catching the ladino in the skull. It keeled over, its horn still embedded in the prostrate vaquero.

They buried him at the edge of their camp and the perfume of yellow huisache blossoms was heavy in the air. They ate their supper and awaited their turn as nightguard for the herd. The name of Alvarez was not mentioned. And Galvan

knew each man thought, Tomorrow I may be the one to die. But it was not a thought of fear. They lived hard, they died hard and it was better to die than for a man to lose his pride.

Only Galvan spoke his name aloud. "Why didn't he cut his rope when he saw he'd missed his throw?"

Monjosa shrugged and said in Spanish, "When you have the gray in your hair, my friend, will you try to prove yourself as courageous as the young men who ride with you? Or will you cut loose your steer?"

"Quien sabe?" Galvan said. He unbuckled his chaps, made of bullhide so stiff that they were like iron fenders against the legs. He lay down, resting his head on his saddle and looked up at the stars. The bitterness he had felt at the death of Guiterrez was absent now. Guiterrez had been young with a young wife. Alvarez had lived his span. Had Alvarez been able to make a choice of sitting in the shade of a 'dobe wall, taking the long siestas of the old, or dying gloriously in the brush, he would have chosen the latter.

The name of Fernando Alvarez would be spoken with reverence and many candles would be lighted in his memory.

GALVAN had been an hour in the brush the next morning with four steers to his credit when Monjosa found him. The horse breaker's dark face showed worry. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Señor Kephart," Monjosa said. "On the road. He wants talk."

"How many with him?"

"I count fourteen."

Quickly Galvan told Monjosa to round up the vaqueros. When Galvan emerged from the brush to the road a half hour later, Monjosa had strategically placed his men so they covered the crowd of Angle Iron riders who squatted in the shade of a giant mesquite.

Kephart rose and crossed the road; Galvan dismounted and met him. The two men faced each other, neither speaking, each measuring the other with his eyes. Kephart was neat and clean with a fresh shirt and a suit that showed few wrinkles. Galvan had a thorn cut on his forehead, his shirt was ripped and there was a stubble of black beard on his jaws.

"I heard you were making a gather," Kephart said. "One of my men spotted your herd yesterday."

"So?"

"You're rustling Angle Iron cattle," Kephart said.

Galvan gave a quick shake of his head. "I'm Bellarmine's partner. I've got a half interest in those cows and I'll protect my rights."

"The herd is legally Angle Iron. Bellarmine forfeited his rights by being delinquent with the lease money."

"Your wife gave him two weeks. The time isn't up yet."

"My wife isn't running Angle Iron," Kephart said thinly.

Galvan looked across the road at the new Angle Iron crew. He saw their cold unfriendly eyes. Mart Rivers leaned against the mesquite, his thick legs widespread, looking as if he itched to drag his gun. At his side stood the red-bearded Burt Dattig, whom Galvan had first seen that day on the porch at Zelda's.

"Is this a new game with you, Kephart?" Galvan inquired mildly, "or an old one?"

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"I wonder if you tried this before in West Texas. Maybe at the Chainlink, but they ran you out."

Kephart put hands on his hips, shoving aside the tails of his coat so Galvan could see the heavy ivory-butted revolver at his belt.

"Is the gun supposed to impress me?" Galvan drawled.

"You'll be smart if it does." Then he stepped closer, his brows flat, the sun wrinkles squeezed tight at the corners of his gray eyes. "I'll tell you once more. Bellarmine's cattle belong to Angle Iron. I'm going to start a gather of my own!" He stood there as if defying Galvan to do anything about it.

Instead of becoming angered, Galvan laughed. "All right," he agreed, "make your gather."

KEPHART regarded him suspiciously. "I wont stand for any tricks," he snarled.

"If your West Texas crew think they can run cows out of the brush, they're welcome to try." His face hardened. "Now clear out, Kephart!"

Galvan's voice had carried to the men waiting by the mesquite. Burt Dattig had been drinking from a bottle. Now he corked it and shouted, "In West Texas we don't fool with no damn Mexicans. We'll ride the brush better'n any damned Greaser that ever wore pants."

Because he evidently did not want trouble now, Kephart said, "That's enough, Dattig!"

"I said Greaser!" Dattig yelled, either whiskey or an inbred desire for violence making him drop the bottle and reach for his gun.

The Mexicans who had stepped out of the brush when they heard the insult the red-bearded man had hurled at them, showed their guns.

But it was Galvan's moment and they did not interfere when he matched Dattig's draw. They watched his gun sweep up and heard the roar of the heavy caliber weapon. The slug crashed into Dattig and spun him, causing him to fire his gun into the ground. The horses, held by two of the Angle Iron men, began to snort and kick up a fuss. Dattig broke at the middle and dropped, his head twisted oddly to one side as if he might have been a dog curled up this way to keep the sun out of his eyes.

As the crashing echoes of the shot reverberated through the brush, Galvan stepped back. But none of the Angle Iron men seemed about to take up Dattig's futile fight.

Kephart said, "I warned you, Galvan," then strode across the road.

Dattig's body was slung across a saddle and in a moment the Angle Iron had disappeared into the brush.

GALVAN sent his crew back to their task with redoubled fury. At the end of the first week they had a sizeable gather and they took a day to move the herd nearer the Bellarmine ranch house where there was a suitable holding ground. Bellarmine and his four riders took over guarding the herd and Galvan and his crew started back for the brush.

The following day Galvan learned that Kephart's Angle Iron crew was working the east end of the thorny empire Bellarmine had leased from the late Matt Ellender.

At night Galvan and his men dropped wearily into their blankets. They grew sour and rank with sweat, and the food was half-cooked. Their tobacco was low and there was no tequila to ease the tension in a man's body before he slept.

One evening as Galvan and some of his riders were starting back to their camp with a dozen steers, they came upon two Angle Iron men deep in the brush. One of them lay on the ground, staring at them stupidly, a visible crack in the crown of his head. His hair was matted with dried blood and there were flies on the wound.

His companion tried to reach a gun but Galvan covered him. This man was one of those he had seen that day at Zelda's. He was short and scratched by thorns. One of his bowed legs had been broken just below the knee. They had been chasing a ladino, the man said, grimacing at the pain of his shattered leg, when their horses had crashed into mesquite. The man on the ground had been flung headfirst into the tree, his horse dying instantly of a broken neck. The second man's horse had crashed into the first and the rider had been flung to the ground.

One of the vaqueros found the second horse hung up in the brush. They got the two injured men in the saddle, then rode within sight of Kephart's camp with them.

Kephart was drinking coffee at the cook fire when he saw his men ride in on one horse. He cursed and stormed around the

camp, accusing his riders of letting him down.

Jones, the rider with the split head, died within the hour. They managed to make crude splints for Sam Benton's broken leg.

"It ain't bad enough that we got the brush to fight and them crazy steers," Benton said, "but there's always the chance one of Galvan's outfit will shoot us out of the saddle. My old daddy used to tell me about Hell. This is it, boys. And every time I ride into the brush I expect to feel the Devil ramming me with a hot fork."

Kephart said, "Cut that kind of talk!" He was thoroughly angered. So far they had only a hundred and fifty head of Bellarmine's cattle, three dead horses and two more that had stepped on the deadly thorn of the melon-like *visznaga* and would probably have to be shot. Now Jones was dead and Benton was out with a broken leg. The rest of the crew was scarred, their chaps ripped to pieces, their clothing shredded by the thorns.

"Nobody can work the brush but a Mex," Benton said.

"Galvan is working the brush," Kephart reminded him. "He's not a Mexican."

"The hell he ain't," Mart Rivers spoke up. "He's more Mex than he is white."

Sensing a reluctance on the part of his men to finish this job, Kephart knew he had to act quickly. He called Mart Rivers aside.

"We'll own this country, Mart," Kephart said, "if we play it right."

"That's what you said at Chainlink."

Kephart forced a laugh. "We had a sheriff there. Nobody here to interfere—once we get rid of Mike Galvan." Seeing he had caught Rivers' interest, Kephart said, "Galvan had his Mexicans hang your friend Oakum."

Rivers scowled. "Sometimes I felt like killing Jody myself. He was always riding me—"

"But he didn't deserve to die at the hands of those Mexicans. Galvan sicked them on him, then didn't have guts enough to admit his part in it to my wife."

Mart Rivers towered over Kephart, thick in the shoulder and belly and legs. "I ain't going after Galvan alone," he said, "if that's what you figure."

Kephart smiled. "We'll go together. We'll find their camp, hide in the brush until we get Galvan in our rifle sights and then—"

Rivers' slow brain struggled with the idea.

"I dunno—"

"You'll be foreman of Angle Iron, Mart. On top of that I'll guarantee a five hundred dollar bonus."

Rivers finally agreed. From the injured Sam Benton, Kephart got the general location of the spot where the vaqueros had found him. Kephart pocketed a small compass. With the best of the bullhide chaps left in camp, and with two stout horses under them they rode into the twilight and in a moment were swallowed up by the brush.

WHEN neither Rivers nor Kephart returned from the brush after two days, Sam Benton decided to ride to Angle Iron. Two of the men hoisted him into the saddle and with his broken leg tied to the stirrup he started for the ranch. The men had been growing restive and had made only a half-hearted effort to gather more cattle. That afternoon, after a long and painful ride, Benton rode into the ranchyard and promptly fainted dead away when those riders who had been left behind helped him out of the saddle. When he came to the boss' wife was peering down at him anxiously.

"When you were passed out," Lorene Kephart said, "you said something about my husband being lost in the brush with Mart Rivers."

Benton raised up on an elbow. "If Galvan ain't killed 'em, they're dead of thirst."

Lorene felt a clutching fear. She was twenty-five and too young to be a widow again. Matt had often told her how cruel the brush country was, how a man could become hopelessly lost. Sometimes his body would be found later, sometimes only his skeleton, for there were scaven-

gers in the brush. The horror of it gripped her.

Suddenly she made up her mind and went to the house and changed into riding clothes. When she had one of the men saddle a horse she rode east, toward Bellarmine's ranch, knowing that under the circumstances she would have no pride, begging a favor from the man she had refused to marry and the man she had fired.

Galvan was working not far from the trail that led to the Bellarmine 77 when he heard Bellarmine shouting his name. Galvan rode his scarred pony through a *sachuiste* thicket, surprised to see Lorene with the Southerner. Lorene seemed thinner than he remembered and there were shadows under her eyes.

Lorene was obviously embarrassed. Memory of their last violent meeting on the hotel veranda in Alto was heavy between them.

Bellarmine said soberly, "She thinks maybe we've either killed her husband or taken him prisoner."

"I haven't seen him," Galvan told the woman, "since I was forced to shoot one of his men three days ago."

Lorene's lips tightened. "I suppose you believe there was good reason for shooting this man. I don't question your motives. But I want the truth about my husband."

"I wouldn't lie to you," Galvan said wearily.

She clasped her hands, her mouth working. "My husband and Mart Rivers left their camp and went into the brush—alone. They haven't been heard from since."

They had dismounted and stood together out of the blinding sun in the sparse shade of a mesquite. Bellarmine had a hand on Lorene's arm to steady her.

Galvan said, "Do you expect me to drop everything and hunt for him?"

She blushed. "I don't deserve much, Mike. I treated you badly and I'm sorry—"

Bellarmine said, "I guess she loves him, Mike."

LORENE started to weep, dabbing at her eyes with a small lace handkerchief that seemed incongruous in this stark jungle. "I have an obsession about becoming a widow again. Don't let that happen to me, Mike. Please."

Before Galvan could answer Bellarmine said, "You go back to your job, Mike. I'll hunt for Kephart."

Galvan swore. "Then we'd have to hunt for you, Ruel!" He turned on Lorene. "I don't know why I'm doing this. Probably only because Matt Ellender was good to me." His voice softened. "And maybe because I feel sorry for you."

"Why do you feel sorry for me?" she cried.

"Because I think you're a fool!" He swung into the saddle. "Take her to your place, Ruel. If I find Kephart I'll bring him there." Then without looking at them again, he drove his horse back into the brush.

When he reached their camp he told Monjosa and the others that they were to drop everything and hunt for Burke Kephart. The Mexicans regarded him silently, making no comment.

Galvan knew they secretly hoped Kephart was already dead. They might make a pretense of a search, but if the man was found, Galvan knew, he would be the one to find him.

As he began the search he realized the whole thing could be a plan of Kephart's. Although he didn't believe Lorene to be a party to it, he realized it would be easy enough for Kephart to drum up some story about being lost in the brush. But what purpose would it serve, Galvan asked himself.

Because he knew the location of Kephart's last camp, he rode within sight of it, then began to study the tracks in the brush. At last he came upon two sets of tracks. Because of the deep imprint left by one of the horses Galvan sensed the mount was carrying a heavier weight than the other horse, possibly Mart Rivers.

It was plain, he saw two hours later, where the men had made their mistake. They had turned east instead of south,

heading into the worst part of the brasada. The sun bore down and he was drenched with perspiration. At noon he ate some cold jerky, resting beside a fern-like growth of *juajuillo*. Later, he found blood on a yucca thorn, and farther on a piece of torn denim. He was certain now that he was on the right trail. As the towering, silent jungle closed in around him the heat increased. He drank sparingly from his canteen. Salty perspiration stung his eyes.

In mid-afternoon he saw them. How they had managed to worm their way afoot through the tangle of brush he never knew. But there they were, Kephart sitting with his back to a mesquite, an empty canteen uptilted in his hand. Rivers lay face down on the ground. He had lost his hat and his face was bloody from thorn wounds. Galvan dismounted, tied his horse and began hacking his way through the brush with a machete.

The sound roused Kephart and he lifted his head, squinting at the man who was fighting his way to the small clearing. Kephart's handsome face was drawn and his tongue was thick and black and protruded between his teeth. His eyes were wild. When he put a hand to his belt, Galvan leaped forward. But the holster held no gun. Somewhere Kephart had lost it.

GALVAN extended his canteen and Kephart lunged for it, but Galvan knocked his hands away. He allowed him a swallow of the water. When Kephart tried to wrench the canteen from his hands, Galvan struck him.

Then he sensed movement behind him. Mart Rivers had managed to get on his feet. His heavy body swayed. With his bloody face he looked like an apparition. His clothes were torn nearly from his body and the wildness was even more pronounced in his eyes than it was in Kephart's. And he had not lost his gun.

"Galvan," Rivers croaked and the semblance of a smile touched his lips.

"Don't shoot him!" Kephart cried. "He can lead us out of here—"

But Rivers' gun roared, sending its echoes crashing through the brush. He fired into the ground, dropping his gun and falling across it, for Galvan had struck him across the right temple with his gun barrel.

Galvan looked at Kephart, feeling a madness in him brought about by the heat and the loneliness and the bone-aching weariness in him. "What makes you think I'll lead you out of here?" he asked.

Despite his experience in the brush, Kephart was regaining some of his old coolness. "You're not the kind to murder a man, Galvan."

"No, you're the kind for that. You and Oakum and Rivers."

Kephart glanced at the unconscious Rivers. "I had nothing to do with Sanchez dying. It was Rivers and Oakum."

Wanting to shoot them both down, but fighting against it, Galvan kicked Rivers awake and then made both men walk ahead of him.

Rivers looked wicked and thoroughly maddened. He tried to lunge for the gun he had dropped but Galvan put a shot between his spread legs that halted him. Then he started lumbering through the slot Galvan had hacked in the brush with his machete, Kephart behind him. Within a quarter of a mile Monjosa and some of the vaqueros found them, drawn by the sound of the shooting.

When Monjosa saw Rivers, the Mexican's face hardened, but Galvan gave him a warning shake of the head. "For now we leave them alone," he said in Spanish.

Two of the vaqueros rode double and Galvan gave their horses to Kephart and Rivers. When they emerged from the brasada onto a broad trail, Galvan told Monjosa and the vaqueros to get back to driving cattle out of the brush.

Monjosa hesitated and Galvan said, "I'll handle these two.

"Do not turn your back on them," Monjosa warned. "A man does not stroke the

head of a rattlesnake unless he expects fangs in his hand."

Galvan gave him a wan smile. "I'll watch out." Then he switched to English and to Kephart said, "Ride on ahead."

"Where are you taking us?"

"To Bellarmine's."

"But why?"

"Your wife is waiting there."

Kephart searched his face, a thin anger in his eyes and Galvan sensed that the man knew that Bellarmine had once asked Lorene to marry him.

THE two men had had water and felt somewhat refreshed. When Galvan crossed Bellarmine's yard with them he saw Lorene rise from a bench where she had been sitting with the Southerner. She ran through the dust, tears staining her cheeks. "Thank God!" she cried, when her husband had stepped down, and hugged him against her.

Kephart said, "I hope you've been comfortable," and looked across her shoulder at Bellarmine.

But Lorene seemed to miss the veiled accusation, for she turned to Galvan, extending her hand. "Thank you, Mike. Thank you."

Kephart watched them a moment, then turned to Bellarmine, who was wearing his shiny black suit and a white shirt. "Perhaps you have some bandages," Kephart said. "Rivers got a taste of Galvan's gun barrel and I'm afraid his skull may be broken."

Lorene looked at the towering, blood-smeared Rivers and her face went white. She turned on Galvan, crying, "Did you have to do that to him, Mike?"

"I didn't do it all. The brush helped."

She peered up at him, shaking her head slowly from side to side. "You have a violent side to your nature that I never realized when you worked for me."

Kephart put an arm about Lorene's waist. "This is war, honey. I suppose you'll have to excuse a few broken heads —and a few dead men."

The irony of his voice touched her and she cried, "Why can't it be stopped?" She began to sob against Kephart's chest.

Then Kephart said with surprising candor, "It'll stop when we all get some sense."

Lorene stepped back, drying her eyes on her forearm. "Do you have a plan?" she asked her husband.

"Yes. But first Rivers should have his head bandaged. Will you take him into the house, Bellarmine, and tend to it?"

Bellarmine looked at Galvan, who said, "Leave him be, Ruel. His head's too hard to break with a gun barrel."

Lorene turned on Galvan. "How can you be so utterly cruel?"

"Is it cruelty to keep Rivers out of the house where he might be able to get a gun and shoot somebody in the back?"

"I don't understand you at all, Mike. You're getting so you trust no one."

Galvan looked at Rivers, who was glaring at him. To Lorene, he said, "The man killed Sanchez. Have you forgotten that?"

Kephart gave Rivers a guarded look and the big man seemed to take this as a cue, for he said, "Me and Oakum was riding along minding our own business that day when Sanchez rode out of the brush. We had to kill him or be killed."

Ruel Bellarmine said quickly, "But that isn't true. Lew Humphrey saw Rivers and Oakum take out after Sanchez—"

"I suppose you know, Ruel," Galvan cut in, "that you've the same as signed Lew Humphrey's death warrant."

Bellarmine turned white. "I didn't stop to think."

Galvan said, "I warned Humphrey out of town. Let's hope that stableman has sense enough to take my advice."

Lorene seemed bewildered. "I don't know what's happened to this country. Everything was peaceful here for so long, then because I get married the whole place blows up."

"Maybe you married the answer to that," Galvan said quietly, looking at Kephart.

When Lorene seemed surprised, Kephart said, "I'm tired of this senseless fight." He gave Lorene an encouraging smile. Then he turned to Bellarmine. "I

feel you've cheated Angle Iron by not paying up that lease. But I'll forget that. To bring this bloody business to an end, I'll buy you out, Bellarmine."

Bellarmine looked at Lorene, a hunger in his eyes. Then he said, "All right. What's your figure?"

"Two thousand dollars cash."

Bellarmine looked as if he had been struck with a club.

It was Galvan who said, "That's an insult, Kephart."

Lorene bit her lip. "Isn't it better to take a little money, Ruel? You can earn more."

"Where can he earn more?" Galvan said thinly. "You were born rich, Lorene, you know nothing of what Bellarmine faces!" He looked at Kephart who was smiling faintly. "Besides, Bellarmine can't sell unless his partner agrees. I'm his partner and I don't agree."

Kephart said for Lorene's benefit, "You can't say I didn't try to reach a peaceful settlement with Bellarmine." He helped Lorene on her horse.

When they had ridden off, Bellarmine said sadly, "She'll believe anything Kephart tells her."

"Let's get that herd built up, Ruel. I want to see some of that fresh Abilene money and to hell with Texas!" Bellarmine agreed, with a nod.

WALLED KINGDOM

Sometimes referred to as The Walled Kingdom of Kennedy, an entire county in Texas, composed of 900,000 acres, is enclosed with a barbed wire fence.

—Bill Carter

DESPITE Kephart's stated preference for single riders, a half dozen married men had been taken on at Angle Iron, mainly because they knew how to work the brush. But more men were needed, so three days after his harrowing experience in the brush, Kephart sent one of his men to Zelda's with a message for the one-eyed Joe Amberling.

"Kephart says to spread the word," the rider told Amberling, after accepting a free drink, "that Angle Iron is paying seventy a month and found."

"Sounds like you expect trouble," Amberling said.

The rider grinned. "It's Bellarmine and Galvan that'll be getting the trouble."

An air of tension hung over the brushland. The main topic of conversation in O'Hearn's was the chances Galvan and Bellarmine had of getting their herd to Abilene. It was generally agreed that somewhere on the trail the herd would be jumped by Kephart. Some thought it might be a good idea to send for the deputy over at Rio, but a majority decided one man, even wearing a badge, would be unable to take any action until the deed was done. Even then it was doubtful if legal action could be taken, for Kephart would be smart enough to stay on the right side of the law. And he did have a legal angle because Bellarmine was behind in the lease money. Kephart could claim he only intended to cut out enough cows from the herd to pay for the lease.

Cora Desmond also heard the frightening rumors, and for two days she listened with half an ear to her pupils recite their "g'ogerfy" lessons. It was during one recess when she heard some of the newer pupils openly bragging what their fathers were planning to do that she felt a numbing fear. She called the new pupils aside, two boys whose fathers had recently been added to the Angle Iron payroll. The boys were afraid of a whipping because they were not supposed to know that Angle Iron figured to hit the Galvan-Bellarmine

herd tomorrow night, before it took the trail for Abilene. They had heard their fathers talking about it.

ABRUPTLY Cora dismissed school and went to the livery where she rented a wagon from a new stableman who said Lew Humphrey had sold out and left for Austin. She drove to the Angle Iron. Many times, when Matt Ellender was alive, she had driven out here with her father. She knew the real reasons for those visits—Mike Galvan.

She drove tight-lipped across the gopher-pocked flats. When she reached the ranchyard her heart sank when she saw the lack of activity about the place, sensing that already the Angle Iron crew was gathered someplace to await the deadly business planned for tomorrow night.

A fat, slovenly woman in the doorway of one of the family adobes said Mrs. Kephart was in the arbor.

Cora found her reading a book, dressed in cool green, her yellow hair carefully pinned up. Cora had an urge to strike her. How could she sit there like that without an apparent care in the world. But when Lorene heard her step and laid aside the book, Cora received a shock. The woman's face was thin and pinched, and her eyes were red and swollen as if she had been weeping.

Some of Cora's anger fled. Quickly she told how she had overheard two of her pupils boast of the Angle Iron plans. "There will be a dreadful slaughter if they attack that herd at night."

Lorene turned, looking at her out of wide eyes. "I don't believe you're telling the truth, Miss Desmond."

Cora was astounded. Then she was gripped by a rage. "How can you be so blind stupid!" She cried. "Have you ever seen a herd stampeded? It's a pretty gruesome sight. A lot of men may die. And why? Because your husband wants to be a big man in this country!"

"My husband wouldn't stampede a herd—"

"Wouldn't he? He didn't stop at murder, Mrs. Kephart."

Lorene's face went white. "He had no reason to want trouble between his men and Sanchez. That Mexican caused it all—"

"Your husband knew that Galvan would stick up for his vaqueros. And he also knew, weak woman that you are, that you'd believe whatever your husband told you to believe."

"You can't talk to me this way!"

"No? The death of Sanchez was deliberate murder. Even so, when Mike Galvan learned that his old riders planned to hang Oakum, he tried to talk them out of it. I was outside the stable when Oakum was hanged. They took away Mike's gun and he had to watch helplessly."

Lorene put a hand to her face. She suddenly began to weep, the tears splashing across the front of her dress.

"Bellarmine was Matt Ellender's best friend," Cora went on. "You turned against him. You've allowed Kephart to come in here and turn the whole country against Angle Iron."

"What can I do?" the woman wailed.

"You can right some of the wrongs. You can force Kephart to call off his men. Let Galvan and Bellarmine take their herd to Abilene. You'll get your lease money."

"I don't care about that lease money!" Suddenly she ceased to cry. She stood with her shoulders slumped, a lock of yellow hair against her pale forehead. "Matt Ellender was a strong man. I admired him. That's the sort of a husband I need." She gave a bitter laugh. "If Mike Galvan had only asked me to marry him—Lord knows I gave him plenty of opportunity."

Cora's mouth tightened and she started across the yard to her wagon. Lorene called after her, "I'll stop this madness, Cora. I promise to make my husband understand!"

When Cora drove across the yard she did not look at the Kephart woman.

GALVAN completed the tally that morning. A total of seventeen hundred cows to drive to Abilene. There were more cows in the brush, but they

could not afford to get them out. Some of their horses were crippled up, their gear was nearly ruined and the vaqueros had left too much of their blood on the blackbrush thorns.

Bellarmine looked worriedly in the direction of the Angle Iron. "I'm surprised Kephart hasn't made his play before this."

"Every hour he delays is another hour we don't have to worry."

Because Bellarmine had no cash and they needed supplies for the long drive to Abilene, Galvan dug up the money sack he had buried near Bellarmine's barn and drove the chuck wagon to Alto. He backed it up against the loading platform behind Rawson's store. When he gave old man Rawson his order, he saw Cora passing the door and, stepping to the walk, spoke her name. She turned, giving him a wan smile. "I was hoping to see you, Mike," she said, and told him of her scene with Lorene Kephart. "She promised to talk Kephart out of attacking you."

Galvan said grimly, "I hope she succeeds. We've had enough trouble." He was studying Cora, realizing she had done a brave thing in going out to Angle Iron.

With the sort of crew they had out there now it was no place for a single girl. "I'm just beginning to appreciate you, Cora."

"It took you long enough," she chided.

"Funny, but I never felt much like taking a wife."

"Until you met Lorene."

He frowned. "Even then it wasn't love."

"Lorene told me yesterday that she would have married you, if you'd asked."

He looked at her with surprise then, because he was embarrassed, said, "I've got to see Humphrey before I pull out. I'm going to make him go as far as Rio and tell his story about Rivers and Oakum to the deputy there."

"You're too late. He's already left town."

Galvan sighed. "Can't blame him. After all, I was the one who warned him away." He tried to roll a cigarette, but broke the paper with his clumsy fingers. "I—I don't figure to come back here, Cora," he said, avoiding her eyes. "There's land in Arizona and—"

When his voice trailed off, she said, "I hope you find happiness there, Mike."

"I'd like to send you the money to come out when I get settled."

IN HER then was an almost overwhelming urge to press her advantage, make him state his intentions. But she knew her pride would interfere. "I know you better than you know yourself, Mike."

"You don't think I'll send for you?"

She made herself smile. "You might—someday."

A buggy pulled in from the west end of town and headed toward them. Lorene, wearing a heavy black veil, pulled the buggy in by the rail where they stood. Galvan heard her call his name and, with Cora, moved over to the buggy.

Bitterly Lorene said, "My husband refused to listen to reason. I tried, Mike. I really tried. I told him to forget about the lease money Bellarmine owes, but he said the money belongs to Angle Iron. I warned him that there would be a bloody fight if he tried to take your herd. I—" She buried her head in her hands. "What can I do, Mike? I'm afraid of him. I guess I've always been afraid of him, but I didn't realize it until today."

Galvan lifted a corner of her veil. Lorene's right eye was purple and swollen and she had a bruise on her cheek. He dropped the veil. "I've had a lot of reasons for hating Kephart," he said tonelessly. "Maybe this is one of the best."

Leaving the chuckwagon in town, Galvan got a horse from the livery and set the animal at a dead run toward the holding grounds three miles from Bellarmine's ranch house.

LEW HUMPHREY had started to head for Austin, riding one of the horses he had taken from his stable. He had sold out cheap to one of the Beeson brothers who fancied himself a business man. Now that he had put the miles behind him, Humphrey began to feel a returning confidence. He knew that Galvan was gathering a herd near the Bellarmine place, so he left the Austin road and began a wide circle so as to come up on the herd from the east where there would be less chance of running into any of the Angle Iron men.

He had a plan carefully worked out. He would hit Galvan up for some money, telling him that he would ride to Rio and tell the deputy there all about the Sanchez affair. Of course, he had no intention of doing it, but Galvan, under the stress of getting a herd ready for the trail, might be inclined to believe him. It was worth a try. He would ask for two hundred dollars, saying it was a fair price for endangering his life by telling on Rivers.

By following the east trail to Bellarmine's 77 he soon came within sight of the house and then swung north in the direction of the holding grounds. He had been out here when Bellarmine had a little money left four years ago and had made his last gather.

He was mentally spending the money he intended to get from Galvan when he suddenly heard the sound of a horse at a gallop. He turned in the saddle and saw Galvan angling along another trail. Humphrey could not believe his good fortune. He rode after Galvan, shouting, wanting to get this transaction over with as quickly as possible.

Around a wall of brush the trail he was following converged with the trail Galvan had taken. Ahead was the herd, a solid mass of cattle, horns flashing in the sunlight. Vaqueros slowly circled the herd. Ruel Bellarmine, wearing a dark hat and a bandanna around his neck, spurred away from the herd.

Galvan had halted when he finally heard Humphery's voice. He sat his blowing gray in the center of the trail, waiting for Humphrey to come up to him.

In the brush surrounding the holding grounds, Burke Kephart and his Angle Iron men had been slowly moving up downwind from the 77 remuda. Here the brush was not so thick so that they were able to keep their saddles. It was Kephart's plan to wait until the herd started to move; he knew it would be driven due east. That was when he would hit it, hoping to catch as many of the vaqueros as possible by surprise and shoot those who did not go down under the hoofs of the stampeding herd.

He turned his head, seeing Mart Rivers riding ten yards to his left. He was not impressed by the men he had been forced to hire. Amberling had sent three and he had picked up two more who were little more than range tramps. He had sixteen men, which was not bad when he considered those who had quit him after that ordeal of trying to drive ladinos out of the brush.

They were nearly to the edge of the holding grounds, screened by the brush, when he heard the sounds of two horses. He lifted a hand, as a signal for his men to pull up. He saw Galvan burst into view from a brushy trail. Galvan halted his gray and waited a moment, as somebody shouted his name.

The shouts caused some of the steers to lift their heads and an uneasy silence hung over the herd. In a moment Lew Humphrey appeared on the trail and rode toward Galvan.

Mart Rivers shifted his bulk in the saddle. To him Lew Humphrey spelled disaster, for he had heard Bellarmine say that the man might be forced to testify about Sanchez— Thinking of his own safety, Rivers acted on impulse. He threw up his rifle and caught Humphrey in the sights, intending when he fell to shift the gun to Galvan.

GALVAN heard Humphrey yelling something about paying him some

money to give a statement to the deputy sheriff at Rio. Then Humphrey's words were lost in a shrill cry of pain. The ex-stableman pitched out of the saddle and before he struck the ground on the crown of his head, the flat report of a rifle echoed across the holding grounds. Galvan swung his horse as the rifle sent a bullet past his neck. He shouted at Bellarmine, who had left the herd and was coming toward him.

"Get back, Ruel!" he cried, for the crazy ladinos, wild after all those years in the brush, suddenly moved. One moment they were a peaceful circle on the flats, then the circle was broken and they poured out of their tight formation with a thunderous roar.

Instead of running away from the sound of the shot they ran toward it, bellowing, their horns clattering. Galvan had pulled his revolver and fired twice in the general direction of that rifle shot. Almost immediately a horse, blood pouring from a wound in its neck, came piling out of the brush, carrying its rider, a man Galvan did not know, straight toward the plunging mass of hoofs, hides and horns.

Seeing the onrushing cattle, the rider, a dumpy fat man, tried desperately to swing his wounded horse. When it would not respond to the reins, he quit his saddle and ran madly for the brush. Ruel Bellarmine spurred toward him, tried to give him a free stirrup even though the man belonged to the Angle Iron who had started this with the rifle shot.

But Bellarmine couldn't reach him. A dozen steers had cut across the path of their charging brothers and reached the man. The lead steer struck him down and the rest hammered him into the dusty ground. Bellarmine had lost his hat and now his graying hair was loose about his face as he tried to outrun the stampeding cattle.

Galvan saw two of his vaqueros bravely try to get the herd to milling. One of them went down. There was great activity in the brush, men shouting, horses plunging as the Angle Iron tried to escape the wave of ladinos that bore down on them. Galvan caught a glimpse of Mart Rivers' towering figure and fired. But the shot missed. Then, as Galvan whirled his horse out of the path of the maddened ladinos, he saw the first wave of the stampede smash against the wall of brush. Some of the cattle piled up when they struck mesquite, the ones behind them crashing into them. Others found only blackbrush instead of mesquite and roared back into their sanctuary in the brush. Broken branches were flying through the air as the horns struck the brush. A horse screamed. The bellow of the cattle was deafening. The ground rocked from their hoofs.

THEN the herd was gone, their passing only a faint roar in the distance. Dead steers littered the edge of the brush, their necks broken. He saw two dead men he took to be Angle Iron riders. Then

Gone to Texas

Daddy's getting bleary counting money,
Brother's buying mink for every honey,
Sister's tweeds are made by Mister Harris,
Mom supports a Grand Duke right in Paris,
The family's just basking in monetary bliss
Gosh! Omaha, Nebraska, was never like this!

by Jex Hogan

he saw Bellarmine afoot and staggering. The front of the man's shirt was red and at first Galvan thought he had been gored, for the fringe of the stampeding herd had passed over the spot where he stood.

"Rivers," Bellarmine cried, a hand pressed against his chest. "He—he—" Bellarmine's voice died.

Galvan knew the truth. He had been shot, the sound of the weapon drowned out by the roaring hoofs. Suddenly Galvan felt an uncontrollable rage. All the work of these past hellish days was to be done over. The ladinos were back in the brush. Alvarez had died and good men had gone down under the hoofs of the herd. All because of Kephart and Rivers. And the big man had shot Ruel Bellarmine.

Galvan swung close to Bellarmine and started to pull him up into the saddle. Then he saw Rivers. The big man sat on the ground, his back to a mesquite. There was a bullet hole just under his right eye. His head was tipped back against the tree and his mouth hung open.

Kephart was stepping from a huisache. He had lost his hat and there was an ugly gash down one side of his face. He held a gun and his teeth were bared. "I killed him for you, Galvan!" he cried, jerking his head at Rivers. "The stupid fool started the stampede."

Bellarmine had collapsed and Galvan swung down, careful to keep his eyes on Kephart. "Where's your crew?"

"They rode off and left me! Yellow! Maybe you were right, Galvan! Maybe Mexicans have more guts than white men! But it's too late for me to start over now."

Galvan stepped away from Bellarmine, who was moaning softly. Behind him Galvan could hear Monjosa shouting something.

"Come on out of the brush, Kephart," Galvan said, "where I can get a good look at you."

Kephart said, "Drop your gun, Galvan. Either that or I'll kill your friend there on the ground. You may get me, but I'll kill him first."

Galvan saw that Bellarmine's eyes were open. He lay with his legs drawn up, a hand, stained red, held against his chest. "Tell him to go to hell, Mike," he whispered.

Galvan had drawn his revolver and now he stood undecided. Dust from the herd still hung in the air. One of the steers got its forelegs under it, bellowed and then pitched over on its side. Galvan pointed his gun that way, fired, catching the steer in the head and putting it out of its misery.

"That's the trouble with you, Galvan," Kephart said. "You're too damned soft—"

Galvan had swung his gun to cover the steer and now he swung it back, running a few feet to the right so as to put himself between Kephart and his friend on the ground. Kephart was firing and the first bullet caught him in the left arm and swung him around. As he was falling he dropped the hammer of his revolver. Lifted it and dropped it, lifted it and dropped it. Kephart was still shooting, but his weapon was kicking holes in the ground a few feet ahead of him. He was lurching out of the brush, his head twisted to one side. His shirt was no longer spotless and he did not look so handsome. A twig was caught in his thick hair and there was a smudge of dirt across his forehead. As Kephart fell forward on his face Galvan could not help but wonder what Lorene would think of her husband if she could see him now.

THEY hitched up a wagon and drove Bellarmine to town. Behind the wagon that Monjosa drove were the vaqueros, some of them singing a little, for they had found a bottle of tequila miraculously unbroken in the spot where the Angle Iron had been hiding in the brush. Two of them were not singing. They were wrapped in ponchos, their bodies slung across their saddles.

Galvan's arm had been bandaged. He sat on the seat beside Monjosa. "The herd is back in the brush."

"*Si.* That is so."

"I can't ask you to go back and help me

get them out."

Monjosa laughed. "And why not, *compadre*? We are riders of the brasada. That is our life. And it is good."

A crowd met them in town. Galvan slipped to the ground and walked unsteadily to the Johnson house.

He found Cora and Lorene just coming out of the house.

Cora started to come for him, but held back when Lorene rushed forward crying, "Mike, you've been hurt."

He looked across her shoulder at Cora, who stood stiffly, hands clenched at her sides. Then he turned to Lorene, holding her off with his good hand. "I killed your husband, Lorene."

Galvan said, "Bellarmine has loved you for a long time. Maybe he has weaknesses, but he's a true friend. You could do worse than marry him, Lorene."

"I'm a widow, Mike. I'd have to wait a decent period of mourning—"

"Not if you went away for a while," Galvan said. "Go where you're not known. Marry him." Then he added grimly, "He's at Doc Withers'."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"He'll pull through—if he has the proper nursing."

"What about you, Mike?" Cora asked softly.

"I'll gather my half of the herd an' drive it to Arizona."

"You're not coming back?"

"No. I killed Lorene's husband." He gave her a tight smile. "I have an idea after I get Bellarmine's half of the herd out of the brush he'll be grazing it on the Angle Iron."

"What about us, Mike?"

"I'll send for you—"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to let you get away from me this time."

"It'll take two weeks to get the ladinos out of the brush."

"I'll help."

"That's no life for a woman."

"You can't talk me out of it."

"I guess I can't. Not that I want to." •

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.

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He threw himself back over the seat, firing as he fell

MY RANGE, YOUR CORPSE

By W. P. BROTHERS

When the chips are down, an attack is the best defense!

HE FLATTENED himself against the ground, trying to make himself as small a target as possible. Slowly he began to inch forward toward the trees back of the clearing. The snow, fine, powdery flakes, almost like sand, filtered out of a leaden sky. It worked in under his coat and shirt and next to his skin and made his flesh crawl. As he wormed his way along, keeping his head and buttocks low, his eyes searched the huge boulders on the hillside above the half-completed house for the man who had fired at him.

Halfway to the trees he heard a whoosh. The ground six inches in front of his face erupted in snow and dirt. The distant crack of a rifle came winging through the cold air.

"Spotted me," Jess Blake muttered to himself. His legs bunched under him automatically and drove his body up and forward. The joints in his knees were stiff but worked better than he expected. Hunkered over, he made the trees just as the next slug whistled over his head.

He was strangely calm as he moved back into the safety of the trees. He'd halfway been expecting something like

this. With the first snowfall of the year, Dutch Morgan would be reminded that winter here in Montana closed in early. In a way, it was a relief to Jess, because the tension of the past two weeks had been working on his nerves.

He was a quiet, easy-going man, Jess Blake, with the deep-seated confidence that some big men acquire when they know their own strength and ability. His chest was broad and powerful and his arms and legs solid as oak beams. In his twenty-seven years, he prided himself that he'd never gone out to look for a fight. Two years as deputy sheriff had made him a fast man with a gun, but it had also taught him to let someone else start the trouble. He didn't believe in backing down; he preferred to wait until the other man forced the issue.

Well, he thought now, someone was out to kill him. He wondered if waiting had been such a good idea. That first bullet had come close to him up there on the ladder. Maybe it would have been just as well to force a showdown with Dutch earlier. But he did not know whether he could beat Dutch Morgan or not.

For the past two weeks now he'd been working on the ranch house, hoping to get the outer walls up before snow. He could spend the winter finishing the interior. He had the roof on and all but one side completed. He'd been doing that side this afternoon when the jasper on the hill had started shooting.

The first slug had slammed into the ladder, knocking him to the ground. He had lain there for maybe ten minutes, trying to spot the man's location. When there had been no second shot, he had crawled the several feet over to his sixgun.

He wished he had his rifle, but it was in the cabin, several hundred feet away and over open ground. Too risky to try for that. He had crawled around the corner of the house, hoping to put the building between him and the assailant. But when he had tried to make the trees, he realized the man had guessed what he was up to and had changed position.

Now, as he moved silently through the brush trying to get in .45 range, he suddenly had an idea. He didn't want to kill the man if he could help it. Better to take him to town alive. If it could be proved the other was acting on Dutch Morgan's orders, Sheriff Kettrick and the law would take care of Dutch. It would save a lot of trouble that way, Jess knew.

He dropped into a small wooded draw. A movement on his left caught his eye. He froze against a tree. Then he saw it was a horse, looking bunched up and cold and facing out of the wind. "Came alone," Jess said. "Figured he could do the job without help."

MOVING up the other side of the draw, he stopped now and then to look and listen. The wind bit through his coat and sent the snow swirling about his face. But he didn't rush things. There'd be hell to pay if the other man saw him first.

He topped the rise of the hill where he could look down into the open space where his ranch buildings were nestled. The air was hazy with falling snow. He understood why the other's shooting had not been good. The unfinished ranch house, long and low, was off to his left. Beyond that was the barn and his cabin and two sheds he had built last year. He couldn't help the quick feel of pride that flashed through him. It was going to be a fine spread. He had built the barn and corrals first—a man needed a barn more than he needed a proper house. But the house was necessary to his plans. Because those plans included Elaine Kettrick, old Sheriff Kettrick's blue-eyed daughter.

He wanted to get the ranch going good before he and Elaine got married. It might be a couple of years, but here again he didn't believe in jumping into things. He could understand Elaine's impatience. "Jess, someday this waiting for what you want is going to be just the thing that beats you," she had said. Sometimes he himself didn't know how he could stand not having her. But it was best this way; not to act until things were ready. Waiting paid off in the end.

These thoughts went through his mind in an instant. Ahead of him were the rocks, some of the boulders big as houses. The ambusher was still in them, he guessed.

He cut back into the trees again and circled around, figuring to come up from behind. He shivered and wished he had on something warmer. It might be some time before the man showed himself.

There was an open space to cover to get in among the rocks. Jess waited for five minutes, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. His eye could catch no movement. He decided to risk it. Moving fast, he darted across the open space.

He was halfway there before he could see the man flattened out on a huge boulder. But the other saw Jess at the same time. He brought his rifle around and fired before the gun reached his shoulder. He had been too hasty. The slug ricocheted with an ugly whine off a rock on Jess's right. Too close for comfort, he thought.

Then he was among the rocks, pressing himself flat against a wall of stone. The snow was falling faster now, and the flakes were bigger and it was getting dark. He edged forward cautiously until he found a niche out of the wind where he could see if the man made for his horse. He pulled his coat tighter around him and waited. Jess was good at waiting. Let the other make the next move.

PRESENTLY he saw the man sneak between two rocks. Jess could have shot him. Instead, he skirted around the other way. A moment later he saw the other's retreating back.

"Hold it, Mister!" Jess snapped. "You're covered!" He went forward fast.

For a moment, the man was motionless. Jess hoped he would have no trouble. Then suddenly the man spun with the rifle, ducking fast to one side.

He had not reckoned on Jess's fast approach. Before he could get the rifle up, Jess was on him. He knocked the gun aside as the muzzle blasted close to his ear. Jess brought the barrel of his .45 around hard. There was a sickening crunch. The man dropped his rifle and reeled away. Jess was on him in an instant, his .45 digging deep into the man's belly.

A pinched, rat-like face of a man nearing fifty looked up at him. A week's growth of stubble covered his chin. Mean little eyes darted quickly. His chin jumped in little jerks of nervous fear. He expected no mercy, for had the positions been reversed, he would have shown none.

He had seen this one in town with Dutch Morgan's crowd. Killing him would not deprive the world of anything, but Jess had other plans. When the man made no struggle, Jess got off him. The other struggled to his feet, his eyes glowering.

"Dutch should've sent a younger man," Jess said quietly. "A man with better eyes and more brains."

"Have your joke," the man snarled. "What you aimin' to do?"

"Why, I reckon I'm going to see you and Dutch rot in jail," Jess said. "Attempted murder and range jumping is against the law."

The little man whirled away, his hand diving inside his coat. Jess started forward after him. His foot slipped on a snow-covered rock. He went sprawling. He looked up in time to see the older man's fist full of gun. There was only one thing to do, only one thing Jess could do.

He felt his six buck twice in his hand, and the explosions ripped the air apart. A grimace spread slowly over the ratty face. He clutched his chest and his eyes blinked rapidly. Then he pitched forward into the snow and lay still.

Jess got up, cursing himself for not having searched the man for another gun. But he'd worn no belt and holster and Jess had assumed the rifle had been his only weapon.

He looked down at the dead man, feeling no sorrow, only a vague sickness that he'd been forced to kill. He wondered if the man was afraid of Dutch Morgan or of going to jail. He must have known he was signing his death warrant by going for his gun.

Jess went back down to the draw and got the man's horse. It was a scrawny sorrel mare with spur marks on her ribs and flanks and a sore mouth where a curb bit had been used. Dutch's Lazy K brand had been burned in over an obliterated brand. Jess guessed Morgan had not been particular about whose horses he took on the drive up from Colorado.

It was dark by the time he got the dead man down to the buildings. By the light of a lantern, he lay the corpse out in the tool shed and threw an old blanket over it. He took the mare to his barn and curried her down and gave her a big fork of hay and some grain. Then he went to his cabin and built a fire in the sheet-iron stove and fixed himself some supper. It was too late to take the dead man in to town and tell the sheriff what had happened. He could do that in the morning when the storm had cleared. The sheriff would not want the man buried till he'd made an investigation.

After supper, Jess sat back with his pipe and wondered if he'd have a call from Dutch and his boys tonight. He thought not. Dutch would wait until he found out how his bushwhacker had made out.

A LITTLE less than a month ago, Dutch Morgan had arrived from Colorado with the leanest, stringiest looking trail herd Jess had ever seen. Drought had driven them from Colorado. They were looking for new range. With Arne Jacobs as foreman, Dutch had somehow managed to get the herd this far. How he did it, Jess would never know. Guts and nothing else had brought them this far. But the cattle would stand no more pushing, and both Dutch and Jacobs knew it. In the last week of the drive they'd lost more than a hundred head. They'd come to the end of the trail.

Jess had marveled at the man who had managed to keep the herd together, who was strong enough to keep his crew from quitting. Dutch was pushing thirty-five, was built like an ox and tough as rawhide. His mouth was set in a solid line of determination. His gray eyes were like polished chunks of steel.

Dutch drank with his men, but he did not get drunk. When he thought they had raised enough hell, he threw them into the street and ordered them back to camp. The crew, as tough a bunch as Jess had ever seen, obeyed. They had learned the hard way, coming up from Colorado, who was boss. It was only a tremendous strength that had brought them this far, and that strength was in Dutch Morgan, their boss. It was a power like electricity; Jess felt it when he was in the presence of the man, and he was awed by it.

Arne Jacobs, foreman of the Lazy K, was only a cut under Dutch. He was younger than Dutch by five years, but did not have the other's inner strength. He bragged and swaggered where Dutch did not need to. Jacobs had a mean temper after a few drinks. His black eyes and broad mouth were cruel. Jess had seen him once kick a Lazy K man senseless over some trifling matter.

And Jacobs hated Dutch, hated him with a bitter, cankerous hate. Jess understood this the first time he had seen the two together. He guessed Dutch had once shown Jacobs who was the better man—and Jacobs had nursed his bitterness until it was in his bones like a venom.

DUTCH had come looking for range, but all the good range in these parts was taken. After coming so far, he would not be satisfied with any but the best. He saw the lush grass, fetlock high, on Jess's Bar Diamond. He had offered Jess a good price, but Jess had put too much into the place, had worked too hard, to consider selling. Jess dreamed of the Bar Diamond with Elaine Kettrick on it, and he wasn't selling that dream for anybody's money.

Jess had offered to range the herd over the winter for a fair price, but Dutch would have none of that. He ended by telling Jess if he wouldn't sell, then he, Dutch, would take it.

The thing might have been settled then and there if Sheriff Kettrick hadn't happened into the saloon. Jess had told

Dutch to go to hell, and Kettrick saw what was up. His hand dropped to his beat-up .45. He told Dutch he'd not stand for trouble in his town. Dutch looked around for some of his boys, but they were busy drinking. Only Arne Jacobs had followed the talk.

It was as tight a situation as Jess had ever seen. Jacobs moved to one side, his face twisted in a mean smile. Dutch's steel-gray eyes shifted from the sheriff to Jess, then finally to Jacobs. He knew how Jacobs felt about him. All at once he decided not to put his life in Jacob's hands. He accepted the sheriff's ultimatum with an ugly grunt and stalked from the saloon.

Jess wondered later how he would stack up against Morgan. The man let nothing stop him. There was a showdown coming. He did not know whether he was faster than Morgan or not. That was the big question that gnawed at his mind. So he waited, hoping to avoid trouble. If Dutch forced the thing, Jess guessed he could figure out what to do when the time came.

He awoke at dawn, and it had stopped snowing, but the weather had turned colder. Jess swung out of his bunk shivering and pulled on his boots and levis. He thought about the man in the tool shed and did not look forward to his job that day. He built a roaring fire and rassled up some breakfast. After he had done the few chores about the place, he hitched up a wagon for the drive to Bear Creek.

He loaded the dead man in the wagon, threw in the man's saddle and bridle and tied the sorrel mare's lead rope to the back. He thought a moment, then before he left, went back to the cabin and got his rifle.

It was a long, cold trip to town. Jess sat huddled on the seat, his mackinaw collar turned up against the icy wind that whipped through the mountains. A little before noon he pulled the wagon up before the Bear Creek jail. He got down and went inside. To his surprise, there was no one in the jail office. The pot-bellied stove was cold. He crossed the street to Sam Welch's hardware store. Sam did any undertaking there was to be done in Bear Creek.

"Sheriff's been gone two, three days now," Sam said as he aimed a squirt of tobacco juice toward his woodbox. "Rode over to Poker City to investigate a ruckus. Reckon with this weather, he'll be gone more'n a week."

Jess grunted. "I've got a dead man on my wagon outside," he said. "One of Dutch Morgan's men. Tried to bushwhack me yesterday afternoon. I didn't mean to kill him, but I had to."

Sam scratched his face and whistled softly. "Dutch ain't gonna like that none."

"I don't care whether he likes it or not," Jess said. "Shall I bring the jasper in?"

For a long moment, Sam was thoughtful. "Reckon you better not," he said. "I wouldn't want any trouble with Dutch and his crowd. They might not like a stranger to do their planting."

"You don't have to bury him," Jess said. "The sheriff will probably want to look him over. He'll keep if this cold weather holds."

"Nope," said Sam, shaking his head. "I don't want no trouble with Lazy K. I wouldn't dare take over the body. For all I know, Lazy K might want to save expense and do their own burying."

"But I can't just leave him in the street," Jess protested.

"Now, I'll tell you what," Sam said. "Arne Jacobs and a couple of Lazy K boys rode into town an hour ago. They'll be at the Excelsior, I reckon."

Jess shrugged his big shoulders and went out. He had not anticipated trouble getting rid of the body, nor had he figured on the possibility of the sheriff being away.

WELL, he'd have to see Arne Jacobs, find out what he wanted done with the man. As he crossed the street to the Excelsior Saloon, he felt a knot tighten in his stomach and a chill run along his back that was not due to the cold. Jacobs would likely as not blow his top. Jess bunched and unbunched his hands in his mackinaw pockets and wished his fingers

were not so cold and stiff.

He thought about Elaine Kettrick, probably now sitting in her comfortable living room. For a moment, Jess was tempted to go up and see her before he confronted Jacobs. Then he decided his first job was to get rid of the dead man.

Two men were standing at the bar that ran along one side of the room. Near the stove in the rear, a poker game was in progress. Arne Jacobs and two other Lazy K men were in the game. Jacobs had his hat pushed back on his head, his chair tilted back, the greasy cards held close to his barrel-like chest.

Jacobs glanced up as Jess crossed the floor. An expression like surprise flickered for a moment across his heavy face. The others at the table looked up then. Their interest in the card game suddenly vanished.

Jess wasted no words. "There's a Lazy K man outside on my wagon," he said. "What do you want done with him? He's dead."

This time Jacobs's eyebrows went up visibly, then he caught himself and his forehead creased into a frown. "What makes you think he's Lazy K?" he asked.

"He was riding a sorrel mare with Lazy K markings," Jess said. "The horse is outside, too. You can take them both back with you."

"Gil Sanders—" one of the Lazy K men hissed between closed teeth.

"Who killed him?" Jacobs asked, his voice flat, toneless.

"I did. He tried to jump me with a rifle. And you can tell Dutch Morgan I'll shoot any other Lazy K men I find on my place."

"You've got a big job cut out, Mister," Jacobs said.

Jess did not answer. There was no need to answer. He stood there, waiting to see what Jacobs was going to do; he didn't want to start anything. He'd let Jacobs make the first move.

THE ONLY sound in the room was the crackle of the stove and tense breathing. Finally Jacobs could stand the silence no longer. All at once something seemed to snap inside him. He lunged out of his chair with a roar. The card table went over with a crash. Those around the table scattered.

Jess stepped back and a heavy fist grazed his chin. He moved in quickly, sinking a left into Jacobs's solid middle. Before the grunt reached Jacobs's lips, Jess threw a powerful right to the jaw.

Jacobs went down and skidded along the floor on his back. Jess stripped off his mackinaw. He was ready when the other came up. He wondered why the two Lazy K punchers did not back their boss. Then he saw the reason. Bill Daley, the old bartender, had pulled his short .44-40 Winchester from the wall. The two Lazy K men looked on as if they didn't give a damn what happened to Jacobs.

Jess backed away as Jacobs plowed forward. He caught a blow in the ribs that left him gasping. Then Jacobs planted a numbing blow high on his cheek. Jess shot in two swift jabs, then retreated.

He sidestepped as Jacobs rushed. He felt his fist connect with a solid crunch of bone against bone. A sliver of pain raced up to his shoulder. He brought his right around in a quick hook before Jacobs could recover.

The two moved up and down the saloon floor then, trading blow for blow. Jess felt the other's fists drive relentlessly through his guard. But each time he lashed out his own powerful jabs, they connected solidly. When Jacobs still rushed forward like a bull gone berserk, Jess changed his tactics. He shifted his punches to the man's ribs and middle.

After a long time, when Jess thought his body could stand no more, he sensed the other begin to weaken. The fists that got through to him began to lose their sting. The man was even starting to swing short. Jess put everything he had into his driving arms, forced his feet to move a little faster. He shifted his attack back to Jacobs's jaws and face, letting his body carry behind the weight of his punches.

Suddenly, without warning, Jacobs's arms went down. His knees sagged. Jess

took two more swings, felt the other's head snap each time. He stepped back and let Jacobs pitch to the floor at his feet. The Lazy K foreman did not move.

Jess staggered over to the bar, his breath coming in short painful gasps. The two Lazy K riders looked on as if they couldn't believe what they'd seen—Jacobs beaten. Jess sleeved the blood from his mouth and held to the bar for support. His knees felt like jelly. Bill Daley put down his rifle long enough to pour out half a tumbler of whiskey. Jess put it to his raw and bleeding lips with a hand that would not hold still. He took a long swallow. It burned in his cut-up mouth and all the way down his aching throat. But soon he felt some strength creep into his tired arms and legs.

When he could manage it, he went out the back and broke the ice on the water bucket. He sloshed icy water over his face. He came back and pulled on his mackinaw. Every muscle in his body ached with a stabbing soreness.

Nobody in the room spoke as he crossed to the door. Before he went out into the icy air, he took one look back. The two Lazy K men were heading toward the bar for whiskey. Arne Jacobs had not moved from where he'd fallen.

Outside, he stopped. He still had the dead ambusher in the back of his wagon, still did not know what to do with him. If Sheriff Kettrick were here, he could order Sam to take him. But Jess couldn't do that. Arne Jacobs was in no condition to take him.

That left Dutch Morgan. After all, the dead man had belonged to Lazy K. It was up to Jess to deliver him. If Dutch wanted to take the responsibility of burying him before the sheriff got back, that was Dutch's worry.

Jess didn't look forward to the drive out to where the Lazy K herd was running on free range, but he didn't know what else to do. It might force a fight with Dutch, but that was a chance he had to take. He was willing to go out of his way to avoid having trouble, but he did not know what to do with the body.

He climbed on the wagon. The cold air made the cuts on his face sting. Through the frosted window of the hardware store, he saw Sam Welch's somber face peering out at him. Jess turned away. He clucked to the horse, and the wagon went rattling out of town.

IT WAS a good hour's ride out to Morgan's herd. The grass was sparse as it stood up under the thin layer of snow that had fallen yesterday. Morgan would have to buy hay to keep his cattle through the winter. It was hard on a man, but Dutch had the money. And he must have known when he left Colorado what he'd be up against.

As Jess neared the area where he expected to find Lazy K cattle, he was surprised to see that the herd was no longer here. He drove the wagon across the open range and up a low hill for a better look. In the distance he could see the herd being moved to the west. For a moment, Jess was puzzled.

Suddenly then he knew what Dutch Morgan was up to, what Jacobs had been doing in Bear Creek. Morgan was already moving his herd toward the Lone Dog Cut which led to Long Valley, a part of Jess's own range. They had waited till Sheriff Kettrick had been called away. Jacobs was in town to keep an eye open while Morgan moved the cattle in on the Bar Diamond. If the ambush of yesterday had been successful, so much the better. But Jess knew that Morgan was prepared to go in shooting if he had to.

Jess started the wagon rattling over sagebrush and stones. Behind, the sorrel mare loped easily along. It would take him about an hour, Jess thought grimly, to catch the herd.

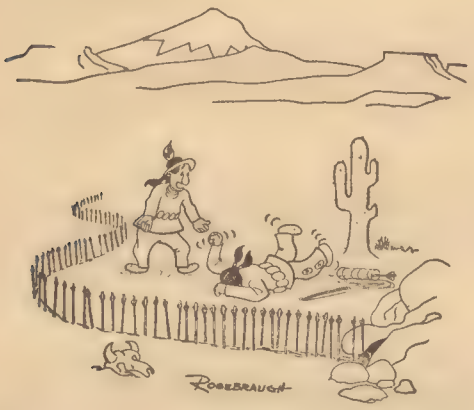
As he got closer, he counted four riders moving the herd along. A chuckwagon followed behind. The riders pushed the animals slowly, taking their time, as if they had all the time in the world. Jess pulled his mackinaw up so his gun would hang free. When he came within shouting distance, he hailed one of the riders.

The man rode over, his shoulders

hunched up, his hat pulled low and a scarf tied around his ears for warmth.

"Get Dutch," Jess commanded. "I've got a dead man here that belongs to Lazy K. Man name of Gil Sanders."

The rider stared at him for a minute with hostile eyes. Then, without a word, he wheeled his horse around the herd. Presently Jess saw Dutch come riding toward him. The man sat his saddle straight, like a soldier. He wore no gloves and his



"But what could you do with the rattlesnake if you *had* hit it?"

hat was square on his head. He looked as if he did not care about the weather, as if he had decided not to acknowledge it.

Dutch came closer, his eyes moving neither right nor left as he approached the wagon. He reigned up. His face was the dark color of old granite and as steady and expressionless as the stone itself.

"What you want?" Dutch demanded curtly.

"I'm delivering your man Sanders," Jess said. "I killed him on my place."

"I don't want Sanders. The man was worthless."

"You'll take him," Jess said, his voice hardening. "I'm tired carting him around. And you'll also turn your herd back from Long Valley."

Dutch looked at him for a full minute before he spoke. "I'm taking my herd into Long Valley," he said. "I'm taking that range and that north to the mountains and east to Big Bear Creek."

JESS FELT his muscles tense. In spite of the cold, a trickle of sweat ran down his side. He had come to deliver a corpse, not to force a showdown. But this was it, he knew. This was the ultimatum. It was either fight or crawl.

"That range is already stocked," he said quietly. "I've given you terms for wintering your cattle. You'll either meet the terms or keep out."

"I'm not looking for terms," Dutch said. "I'm taking that range."

Jess waited. The tension between them was like a living thing. He could read no expression in Dutch's hardened face. He watched Dutch's hands, but they did not move from where they rested on the saddle horn.

Abruptly then Dutch wheeled his horse about. Amazement began to creep through Jess that Dutch had backed down. But a sixth sense kept him poised and ready.

What happened then took only a split second. It happened so fast that Jess could hardly follow it. He saw Dutch's hand slice back. The man turned in the saddle, and the horse jumped around. The gun appeared in his hand.

Jess's own muscles responded the moment he saw Dutch's hand move. He forgot his tired arms and raw knuckles. His gun slid into his fist. He threw himself back over the seat, firing as he fell.

He heard Dutch's gun explode. Something slammed into his thigh. Dimly he remembered seeing Dutch jump in his stirrups, as if he'd been touched with a red hot branding iron. Jess saw two slugs catch Dutch full in the chest. The side of the wagon splintered a scant two inches from his own head.

Then Jess's gun was clicking empty. He was not conscious of having fired six chambers, but he knew he must have. And he knew that six slugs were in Morgan's big frame.

The man sat his horse, an expression of

bewildered surprise etched in his face. He blinked his hard, gray eyes rapidly. For the first time, Jess saw the man's glance waver uncertainly. He had suddenly discovered that his ability was fallible, but the knowledge had come too late.

Jess reached for the rifle and dropped from the wagon as the other riders came thundering up. They saw Dutch slipping from his saddle. When they realized he had come out short man, something like relief crept into their faces.

They were of no mind to avenge him. The man who had driven them and cursed them and bullied them was finished. They hated him and did not regret to see him die.

Jess cut away the leg of his levis with a pocket knife. The bullet had ripped across his leg, torn out a sizable piece of flesh. He let it bleed clean before he bound it.

He ordered the men to put Dutch's body in the wagon with the ambusher. He had forced a showdown by coming out here with the body. He saw then that that was the only way he had come out on top of this thing. If he had waited, Dutch and Jacobs would have ridden down on him at the ranch. He wouldn't have had a chance when they closed in. He had taken them on separately—and the corpse to be delivered was not his own.

As he started back to town, he remembered Elaine's words. "Jess, someday this waiting for what you want is going to be just the thing that beats you."

She could have been right today. He knew then a man had to meet things half way, whether it was trouble or happiness. He could spend his whole life waiting—and he'd have nothing more than when he started.

There was one thing that wasn't going to wait any longer—and that had to do with Elaine Kettrick.

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Marcel Wins a Bet

By BOB and JAN YOUNG

A French chef discovers a novel dish — *putois d'Amérique sauté*

"Thar warn't a rabbit around all day"

UNTIL Marcel, who proclaimed himself the world's greatest chef, arrived in San Juan, Senate Jones had been reasonably satisfied running his tavern and restaurant rather than trying to grub gold from the reddish brown hills.

Senate had been one of the first to arrive in San Juan after Lou Watkins scratched out some color in the dry diggings. Like most prospectors, Lou couldn't stand prosperity. He got drunk, babbled all he knew, and the rush was on.

Senate made friends easily. The miners flocked to his small building for their drinks and eats, particularly after Senate became known as one who could stand the

drinks on the house every now and again. Senate's booming laugh, and hearty invitations echoed down the dusty street most every day.

But his feeling of well being was shattered when Marcel moved up from French Gulch, and opened his famous French restaurant next door to Senate's City Hotel.

"Now that I arrive," Marcel bragged to the miners, "San Juan she is a real city with a real restaurant." Marcel was also quick to point out there wasn't a dish he couldn't fix. "Eef I don' have the order, I weel improvise."

And despite Senate Jones' popularity some of the miners did begin to think his bacon and bean fare was a little plain. Senate's face grew longer as he saw the tables filled at Marcel's eating house, or restaurant, as he pleased to call it.

To further madden Senate, Marcel even hired away Old Dad Lamb to do his game hunting for dishes requested by the now fastidious miners. Quail, squirrel, or even venison were demanded by the miners who had paying claims. As a matter of fact Lou Watkins, who'd made the first strike, came into San Juan every Friday for a complete dinner of jack-rabbit. Lou stoutly maintained that there was nothing like jack-rabbit as prepared by the Great Marcel.

It was one Friday late in November when Old Dad Lamb set out to do his hunting for the meal that night. He hunted all day, but no jack-rabbit. Frantically, he scoured through the hills, and as the sun began to sink, Old Dad saw a striped polecat running along a wooden flume.

"That'll prove to Marcel how hard game is to get today," Dad muttered as he shot the skunk from the flume.

Marcel's excitable screams were heard way over to Senate Jones' City Hotel when Dad brought in the cat.

"But, Marcel, I just couldn't get anything else," Dad explained. "Thar warn't a rabbit around all day."

Marcel pulled at his thinning hair, and grimaced. "What I do?" he moaned. "Lou Watkins has ze standing order for rabbit, and he will be here pretty quick. My reputation is—phht eef I don' have ze rabbit."

Old Dad Lamb shrugged and turned away just as Senate Jones walked up, having overheard the conversation.

"You've always boasted you'd serve any order the miners gave you," Senate reminded him.

Marcel nodded sadly, recalling the boast. He realized not only his reputation was at stake but also his entire business future in San Juan. And just when he had Senate on the run too.

"I've got a fifty dollar slug that says you can't cook that cat so's it will pass for jack-rabbit," Senate taunted. "This will be the real test—if you're as good as you say."

Marcel blustered and squirmed, but he finally agreed. He made the provision, if he put it over, then Senate would keep only his tavern, leaving all the restaurant business to Marcel. If he failed, then Marcel would seek happier climes.

Old Dad Lamb held the bets, and confirmed the agreement. Then he wandered off with Senate to the tavern, where they related the plan in detail to the large group of interested miners.

Senate's guffaws were loud and long as he confidently related the bet.

A LARGE crowd pressed noses against the windows as Lou Watkins appeared that night, and ambled to his usual table. He was the only diner in the entire establishment. The rest of the town was observing, unknown to Watkins. Pulling on the large white napkin, the old timer settled himself and ordered his usual jack-rabbit dinner.

Senate and the miners grinned as they saw the huge platter set before Lou. The golden crusted meat was delicately garnished with water cress and vegetables. Lou pitched in hungrily. Gradually the meat disappeared along with the rest of the meal.

Senate Jones' face was long again as he realized he had lost the bet. "Not only that but I proved that Marcel is as good a cook as he claims."

But Senate's turned-down mouth,

curled upwards as he heard Lou Watkins call Marcel to the table:

"I don't think you done right by me," Lou whined.

Marcel's eyebrows raised, but he said nothing.

"Why haven't you ever cooked rabbit like this here one, before?" Lou demanded gruffly. "It ain't fair that I been paying the same high price all along, when you could really turn out a dinner like this."

Marcel's latent temper was seething as he heard the complaint. "Why you keep coming back, eef you don' like it?" he retorted sharply.

"Those was all right, but never like this," Lou goaded. And the old timer kept ragging him, about getting a refund on his previous meals, with Marcel growing madder all the time.

"You know so much about food, do you?" Marcel exploded, losing control of his temper. "That was no jack rabbit. That was a polecat you liked so much."

Lou Watkins paled, gulped, then shouted he didn't believe it. No one could fool him like that.

Marcel rushed to the kitchen, swished back with the black and white skin, and shook it before Lou's face.

Other guests in the dining room had naturally heard the fracas. Greenfaced, they looked askance at their plates, wondering what had been set before them. Lou Watkins, white and shaking, reached for his sixguns; but Marcel anticipated the move. He was already on his way out of the diner, skittering up the dusty street.

Dust spurted at his heels as the bullets from Lou's gun whined nearby. Marcel jigged up the street past where Senate Jones was doubled up with laughter. But Senate managed to pitch him the octagonal fifty dollar slug as Marcel ran by. He caught it and panted on out of San Juan.

Shortly, Senate Jones' hearty laughter rang out as he joked with customers at his well patronized bar and restaurant. The only restaurant now in San Juan.

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ROUGH ROUNDUP

A body in the mud, a bleeding hole in its back —

an Indian father thirsting for vengeance —

and seventy quick-triggered suspects . . .

He suddenly let out a roar and charged Roddy

A Novelet by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

JIM McCONNELL was getting a few well chosen words of advice from his employer before leaving for the roundup, and he felt in all humility that he stood in need of them.

"They've handed you a big assignment, Jim," Syd Lyons was saying, "but if I hadn't thought you were equal to it I'd have voted against you. Just keep your neck bowed and your feet on the ground."

Lyons smiled with fatherly regard at the husky young rider standing hat in hand before him. He was a good looking youngster of twenty-three, this Jim McConnell, with his expressive brown eyes and black, curly hair; inclined to recklessness in his personal action, yet possessed of poise and judgment; else Lyons would not have made him foreman of his Gooseneck outfit at twenty. Next spring, if all went well, Jim would be Lyons' son-in-law.

"I don't know why they handed me the job, but I'll do my best," Jim said.

The job was that of handling the big cooperative fall roundup, where Jim would be in charge of from seventy-five to a hundred men instead of the six or

eight riders employed by the Gooseneck.

Lyons said, "You know that both Gus Hinkle and Verne Roddy think they should have had the job, but the way they hate each other it wouldn't have worked. I'd have preferred Roddy myself because he's older than you, with more experience, but Hinkle would have balked."

Jim took no offense. He replied smilingly. "I only wish you hadn't got crippled up so you could have handled it yourself."

Lyons ignored that. He said, "Your big job is going to be to keep those two from fighting, so don't take any guff from either of them. They'll both bulldoze you if they can, so don't let 'em get the jump on you. And there's one other thing: I've heard rumors that the Indians are dissatisfied. Hinkle has always hated them, and Verne Roddy isn't much better. We've got to keep on good terms with them."

"I don't think that'll be hard," Jim said. "I know the Indians, and I think they like me."

"I know that. Just don't let any of 'em be kicked around." Lyons held out his hand, and the interview was over.

BLANCHE was in the kitchen with her mother. "Well, I'm on my way," he said cheerfully. "How about a good-bye kiss?"

"Need it be singular?" Mrs. Lyons asked, and he kissed them both.

"You take care of yourself," Blanche told him fondly, and added an extra kiss.

His kid brother Bert, not yet turned fifteen, was waiting for him at the corral. Bert had begged to go along for the excitement, and Jim had finally consented. "If anybody is as slow as you are saying good-bye you won't get the cattle gathered before spring," Bert said.

"Hold your lip, button. We'll see how fast you are getting wood and water for the cook," Jim said good naturedly.

Another brother, Dan, one of the regular riders for Gooseneck, was already on his way to the starting place on Corral Creek.

Before Jim and Bert reached camp it had started to rain, and they turned up the collars of their slickers. "Want to turn back?" Jim jibed.

"Not on your life," Bert said. "This weather will change."

"You said it. It'll change to sleet, then snow, then back to sleet and mud," Jim said disgustedly.

The roundup was already a week late, and it would be bad enough without the rough weather he knew they were in for.

They reached the general camp an hour or so before sundown. There were tents and wagons all over the place, and it looked as if nearly everybody was there. There were three chuckwagons from which the outfit would be fed; one belonging to the Gooseneck, one to the Wineglass, of which Verne Roddy was foreman, and the other to Gus Hinkle, owner of the C Bar C.

Most of the men there were small ranchers, or nesters, who seldom did any riding except at roundup time. Some paid the big outfits for looking after their cattle, some didn't. Few of them owned horses enough to handle their own riding. The rest of the men were reps from other parts of the range.

Jim knew that Dan hadn't arrived when he saw three Indians crouched apart from the rest with a blanket over their heads as protection from the rain. He went over to them at once.

He was surprised to see an oldish Indian with long gray hair. This was Ben Digger, boss over all the cattle on the reservation, a fine, dignified old man who was a straight shooter. His presence here indicated that the Indians were suspicious.

Jim shook hands with Ben and made him welcome. He had eaten many a meal in Ben's camp or wickiup. "You eat with us," he said. "I told Dan to have your men sleep in our tent if you haven't got one of your own."

"No bring tent," Ben Digger said.

Jim turned to shake hands with a young Shoshoni named Warjack, next to Ben Digger his best friend on the reservation. Warjack, unlike most of the Indians, spoke

pretty good English, and had not a trace of the usual Indian taciturnity. The third Indian was Ben Digger's grandson, with the double-barrelled name of Robert Bob. He was about eighteen, and like his grandfather wore his hair long, and covered with a silk bandana attached to his hat.

Warjack grinned, "Big chief now, you. Hat too small, mebbe?"

Jim grinned. "How come you ride with these young bucks, Ben?" he queried.

Ben didn't answer at once. Finally he said, "Injun cattle—loseum too many."

THE implication was clear. Ben thought Indian cattle were being stolen and he was there in person to see what he could find. Jim hoped heartily that Ben was mistaken. In the past both the C Bar C and the Wineglass had had trouble with the Indians, but this was the first time rustling had reared its head.

"Mebbe we find 'em, Ben," he said, and pointed out the tent that they were to occupy.

At that moment Gus Hinkle rode up with some of his men and his cavvy, which Jim noticed instantly was considerably shy on horses. He was on hand when Hinkle dismounted.

Gus Hinkle was a short, thick-shouldered man of forty with a habitual sour expression. Mean and stingy, he had never been popular on the range. He was plainly in a vile mood.

"Where's the rest of your cavvy, Gus?" Jim queried.

"I brought all I need—six horses to a man," Hinkle growled.

Jim remembered Syd Lyons' advice not to let them get the jump on him.

"It's not enough," he said curtly. "You know very well we have to take up the slack for these little fellows. Roddy and us will share with 'em, but it ain't enough. We'll need thirty or forty head of yours."

Hinkle said coldly, "I'm not raising horses for any damned nester to ruin. Let 'em get their own."

This was a showdown. If Hinkle got away with it Jim could expect to be defied any time he gave an order that Hinkle didn't like. A number of other men had crowded up now, including Verne Roddy and his chief assistant, Cash Caldwell.

"You're not a damned bit better than Roddy or me, Gus," Jim said clearly. "In the morning I'm taking as many horses out of your cavvy as I need. If it runs you short you can send to the ranch for more."

Hinkle hadn't looked for that. He showed his astonishment, and then he blew up. "I'll shoot the first man throws a rope on a horse with my brand," he roared.

"Then get your gun oiled, Gus, because I'll be roping some of 'em in the morning," Jim said steadily.

"It didn't take long for your head to swell, did it?" Hinkle said sarcastically. "Well, you ain't giving me orders, punk."

"All right," Jim said. "Then you can take your outfit and pull out. But as long as you camp with us you'll take my orders."

Hinkle could hardly believe his ears. He knew that if he got his cattle gathered he would have to cooperate. "I won't stand for it," he bellowed. "I'm calling an election right now to git a new boss."

VERNE RODDY threw away his tailor made Fatima cigarette and pushed to the front. He was a handsome, blond man of thirty-two, a master of his trade, with an agreeable manner that made most people like and admire him. He said coldly, "The matter was settled a week ago. We don't need another election. I'm taking orders from McConnell, and you can do it too, or pull out."

Hinkle made two angry little dabs at his heavy mustache. He knew that he had to back down, or his cattle would be choused all over the range by his enemies. He hated Verne Roddy far worse than he hated Jim McConnell.

Both men were bachelors, but Gus had a sister Annie who kept house for him.

Although a rather pretty woman, she was nearing thirty unmarried, and it was said that she was an old maid because Gus had chased every suitor she had ever had away with a gun. Verne Roddy had been the last.

"All right," Gus rumbled, "but young McConnell will never run another round-up."

Roddy said, "If anything happens to Jim, Hinkle, the rest of us will remember that threat."

A look of bewilderment, followed by anger, came over Hinkle's face. Undoubtedly he had meant that Jim couldn't win another election, but Roddy had twisted his words to imply that he had made threats against Jim's life. He suddenly let out a roar and charged Roddy with both fists flailing.

Gus landed a wild right to the side of Roddy's face, but got caught with a left on the nose that rocked his head back and brought blood. Then the younger man was after him with short, snappy blows which Gus was unable to block.

Jim tried to throw himself between the two men, but the blows were coming too fast. Then he saw that his brother Dan had arrived, and he yelled, "Grab Gus, Dan," while at the same time he caught Roddy around the middle from behind.

But Dan failed to get a good hold. Gus broke loose and landed a powerful blow to Roddy's jaw while the man was being held helpless by Jim. Roddy's knees buckled.

"Grab him, damn it!" Jim yelled, and flung Roddy to one side. Immediately he caught one of Hinkle's wild swings on the cheek, staggered and almost went down.

Then as Dan caught Hinkle and dragged him back, Roddy broke loose from Jim and swung at him. It looked then as if there would be two fights with the McConnell boys battling the late antagonists. Then a rope shot out and pinned Roddy's arms to his sides. Warjack, at the other end of the rope, jerked the Wineglass foreman back.

Powerful Gus Hinkle again had broken loose from Dan, but as he turned to annihilate the youngster Jim caught his arm and brought it up behind his back in a vicious half-nelson. "Want me to break it off?" he queried in Hinkle's ear.

"All right, let go," Hinkle surrendered.

BUT TWO of Roddy's men had leaped forward, caught Warjack's rope and jerked the Indian forward so that Roddy had slack enough to remove the rope. Instead, Roddy calmly drew his knife, slashed the rope, then made for Warjack with the knife. "No damned Injun can rope me and get away with it," he breathed.

"Hold it, Roddy," Jim said. "This has gone far enough." His hand was on his gun, and he was ready to use it. Roddy stopped.

The situation was acute. Roddy was stopped, but if Cash Caldwell or some other Wineglass man took it up blood was going to flow.

"Guess I lost my head," Roddy said. "I'll pay the Injun for his rope."

The camp quieted down after that and the men sought their tents to get out of the rain. Jim hadn't meant it to be like that, but he had at least established his right to be boss.

The Gooseneck had one big wall tent, and it was crowded after Jim invited the three Indians to share it. Jim shared his blankets with his kid brother.

"Golly, Jim, do roundups always start with a fight?" Bert queried as they rolled in.

"They're more likely to wind up with one," Jim replied. "I think I'd better send you back to the ranch."

"Aw, gee, no," Bert pleaded. "This is exciting. Do you think you can lick Verne Roddy?"

"I sure don't want to try," Jim said. "Now shut up and get some sleep. I want you out of here by three o'clock to help the cook get breakfast."

IT WAS a little after three when Jim woke up to hear the steady patter of rain on canvas. He stepped to the door of

the tent and shouted, "Cooks up!" He stepped back and yanked the covers off Bert. "That means flunkies too," he grinned.

Bert groaned protests as he sleepily began drawing on his clothes. Jim lay back and laughed at his shivering kid brother.

In a matter of minutes fires were roaring in the big sheet iron camp ranges at the foot of each chuckwagon. Canvas flies had been stretched out from the tail of each wagon to keep the stoves and cooks dry. It wasn't yet four o'clock when the cooks began to yell, "Come and git it," and the cowhands stumbled out in the darkness to make a pretense of washing before filling their plates with bacon and eggs and hot biscuits and their cups with hot java; retiring to the tents to eat out of the rain.

He talked with Blanche

Before they were through, the nighthawks were driving the cavvy into the long rope corral. The men ate hurriedly and went out to catch their mounts as it became just light enough for them to be able to tell one horse from another.

There were between seventy and eighty men, a dozen or more being reps from distant outfits. Jim knew what he was going to do, and he sought to avoid confusion by dividing the men into three crews and letting the boss of each section assign the various riders.

He had already told Roddy which men to take and what to do. Now he approached Gus Hinkle and said, "Gus, I'm taking three circles, Verne will take a third of the crew on the outside, I'll have another one in the middle, and I want you to take charge of the one on the inside."

"All right," Gus grunted, "but I want one of my men with each of the other crews."

"Okay," Jim said shortly. He had noticed that one of Gus's men already had ridden away toward the ranch, undoubtedly to bring back additional horses. He had won that victory.

ASSIGNING horses to the farmers who were short consumed considerable time. Jim told them all where to ride and gather, and where the wagons would be. He didn't want to be tied down to running one of the crews, and he was in a quandary whom to designate until he noticed that Gus Hinkle had told Bruce Cavenough, one of his oldest and most reliable men, to ride with the center group.

"Bruce," he said, "when I ain't around I'd like you to handle the middle crew. I'll pair 'em out for you."

Cavenough, a red-headed man of forty who knew cattle and whose only fault was a hot temper, nodded assent.

Jim had his own reasons for wanting to pair this bunch. Here were the men he knew best, and the ones he could rely on. He paired Dan McConnell with Warjack to take the hardest rides, and Robert Bob with Leo White, one of the regular riders of the Gooseneck.

"Who I ride with?" Ben Digger asked.

"With me if you want to," Jim said, "or you can ride alone if you like. I'm not giving you any orders, Ben."

The old Indian made no sign, but he was aware that he was getting a concession no other man would receive, not

even Hinkle or Roddy. They were under orders.

"All right, boys," Jim called at last. "You all know the orders. Uncork your broncs and let's go."

The horses were wet and cold, shivering under their saddles. When the riders swung up most of them exploded. They bucked and bawled, bumping into each other, while here and there a rider turned the seat of his pants toward the sky and scrambled wildly when he hit the earth to keep from being trampled upon, and to catch his errant mount before it high-tailed to the hills and lost or ruined a saddle. The day wranglers were already out on the wings to rope any saddled animal that tried to be a bunch-quitter.

It was a wild and woolly scene for five or ten minutes, then it quieted down as the horses got the buck out of their systems. Jim had his own work cut out for him on a steel-dust gray, but he had time to see that Dan was making a good ride. The best ride that he noted was being made by Verne Roddy, but his horse was taking the most punishment and its sides were flecked with blood from flank to shoulder when it stopped pitching. Roddy was a hard and cruel horseman.

Not all the horses bucked. Most of the farmers had been given gentle horses who could be talked out of it if the riders tried. Gus Hinkle's horse stood perfectly still while the razzmatazz was on, while Ben kept his mount under restraint.

The groups separated and left at a run. Jim was aware of the reproachful eyes of his kid brother as he left. Bert felt that his dignity demanded that he be a regular rider rather than a flunky for the cook. But the roundup was on.

FOR the first few days the roundup would have gone as well as Jim could have hoped except for rain. The men were wet and miserable in spite of their slickers, and it was hard going for the horses. The roundup was late starting and the fall storms had come a month early. Tempers were on edge and everybody groused. As he happened to be the boss, most of the grousing was directed at Jim McConnell.

Jim did more riding than anybody, trying to achieve some coordination between his three crews, but it was difficult since none of his three bosses was in the least friendly to him. Cavenough, taking his cue from his employer, was sullen and drove his men mercilessly, getting far out on lead of the other crews. Hinkle was trying to cover more territory than Jim wanted, and so was getting behind. Jim remonstrated mildly with the rancher, but didn't make an issue of it.

Verne Roddy was handling his crew well, but it was several days before he would answer in more than monosyllables. Then one day he said, "Guess I owe you an apology, Jim. And here's a couple dollars to pay for that Injun's rope which I cut."

"It's all right," Jim said, taking the money.

"I still wish you'd have let me wipe up the earth with that old basteroo. I'm afraid some day you'll be sorry."

"I wish there hadn't been trouble," Jim said.

"There'll always be trouble when that stingy, tyrannical old devil is around. And he's threatened to kill both you and me."

"I think you misunderstood Gus."

"He threatened to kill me if I didn't stay away from Annie, and she's so afraid he'll do it that she won't even speak to me. But one of these days I'm going to have it out with him. If he tries to stop me from seeing Annie he'll have to make good on that threat. I won't shoot him except in self-defense, but I won't stand still and let him kill me," Roddy declared.

That conversation worried Jim. He knew Roddy to be a determined man, and Hinkle a stubborn one. He didn't see how trouble could be averted.

Jim also was worried by Ben Digger. Sometimes Ben would ride for an hour or so with him, but usually he was off

alone. As a rule when they were together, with no one else around, Ben would talk freely, but now he was taciturn and moody, and soon dropped behind. Jim couldn't restrain the feeling that there was trouble in the air, serious trouble. Everyone else seemed to feel it, for the usual horseplay around a roundup was completely missing.

IT WAS time now to bring the three crews together and dispose of the cattle that had been gathered. Some of the owners wanted to cut out their stuff and take it to their ranches. The rest would be herded back toward the Blackfoot to be picked up later.

Most of the stuff gathered so far belonged to Gus Hinkle, for this was primarily his range. He was one who wanted to drive a herd to his ranch. Some of the smaller fellows would throw in with him.

The "rodeer" was held in a blinding snowstorm, and brands and earmarks alike were hard to see. Here Jim was at his best, for he was an artist at cutting out cattle, and he owned the best cutting horse in the entire cavvy. Gus Hinkle was undoubtedly the worst man in a herd. He was excitable, and awkward on a horse. Alone, he was able to get an entire herd fussed up and milling, but there was no way to keep him out of the herd.

Jim called on Verne Roddy, Dan, and Warjack, and a few other good cutting hands to help in the herd, while the others were posted on the outskirts to hold the herd and take care of the stuff that was cut out. He looked for Ben Digger, but the old Indian didn't seem to be around.

Once Roddy and Hinkle clashed. Old Gus had his eye on a two-year-old white-faced steer, and was yelling, spurring and quirting as usual, making it difficult for the others to work when Roddy cut in front of him and stopped.

"Git outa my way," Gus yelled, "before I lose that critter."

"What the hell do you mean cutting a Wineglass steer into your herd?" Roddy said. "Can't you find enough of your own to satisfy you?"

"What?" Gus bellowed. "You accusing me of stealing that steer?" His hand dropped ominously to the butt of his gun.

"I'm not accusing you of anything—but that's my steer you're hazing," Roddy retorted coolly.

"That's a damned lie," Gus yelled. "Git outa my way. I'll hang a rope on it and show you."

"You don't have to. I can read a brand and that's mine."

Jim saw the trouble, abandoned the animal he was after and urged his Sport horse through the milling cattle to where the two sat glaring at each other. He heard Roddy say, "Go ahead and draw that smoke-pole if you've got the guts, you old four-flusher. I'd as soon put a slug into you as not."

GUS HINKLE'S face was livid with rage. His hand was on his gun, and Roddy's gun hand lay with apparent carelessness upon the saddle horn, but Hinkle dared not draw. He lacked the speed of the younger man and knew it.

"What's the trouble with you fellows?" Jim demanded.

"He accused me of trying to steal one of his steers," Gus said. "I don't take that from no man."

"He couldn't have meant that, Gus. He may have meant you temporarily misread a brand. Hell, that happens to me right along," Jim slandered himself in the interest of peace. "Where's the critter?"

"Right over there," Gus pointed.

"What a bluffer," Roddy said coolly. "That's not the one you were after at all."

"By God, I won't take any more," Gus yelled, and would have drawn his gun had not Jim caught his wrist. Roddy sat unmoved.

Jim couldn't be sure, but he believed that Gus was right; that the steer he had indicated, and which was surely a C Bar C, was the one he had been after. If true, it meant that Roddy deliberately had picked a row with the intention of bait-

ing Gus into making a draw. In a gun fight Gus wouldn't stand a chance.

Jim said curtly, "Gus's word is as good as yours, Roddy, and if one of your dogies had got in his herd you'd have got it back and you know it. Let it drop now, and get back to work."

Roddy started to say something, thought better of it, and rode away.

"I'll kill him, so help me I will," Gus raved. "No man can call me a thief."

"Look, Gus, it was a misunderstanding," Jim said placatingly. "Why don't you ride out of the herd and cool off?"

Hinkle fumed a little, then reluctantly agreed to leave the cutting to others for the time being. He rode away and was quickly lost in the swirling snow.

Jim went back to work, half minded to call the whole thing off till the storm was over; but there had been too much delay already, and anyway it wasn't too important. The roundup still had ten days to go, and anything missed now could be taken out later.

He kept his head down to shield his eyes from the snow as much as possible, as the rest were doing, concentrating upon the animal he was after. He saw others in the herd, but couldn't tell one man from another. The cattle were bawling loudly and he couldn't hear himself think.

He had just got a C Bar C yearling out of the herd when his kid brother galloped up to him in wild excitement. Jim had let the kid off his flunky duties today and Bert had been helping hold the herd.

"What you gibbering about?" Jim asked.

"Over in a draw there, Robert Bob," Bert chattered. "He's dead. Somebody shot him."

"What? You must be crazy," Jim said.

"No, I'm not," Bert denied. "I happened to ride over that way and I saw his pinto pony snorting and backing away from something. When I got there it was Robert Bob, and he was all sprawled out with blood running over the snow." The boy quivered from the shock of what he had seen" and Jim no longer could doubt.

"Come on, show me," Jim said, his mind filled with dread. Feelings between the white men and the Indians were already strained. Ben Digger was the most influential Indian on the reservation—and Robert Bob was his grandson.

The murder must have been committed in cold blood. Nobody had seen it apparently, and finding the murderer might not be easy. It was impossible to say where any man of the eighty present had been at a given time in that blinding snowstorm.

He followed Bert as fast as their horses could run. They dropped into a little draw, and there lay Robert Bob as Bert had said. He had been shot in the back, and he was dead.

JIM DIDN'T know why he happened to think of Gus Hinkle, but he remembered that the cowman had left the herd in a vicious mood—and he hated Indians. He had been in a mood to kill somebody when he had ridden out of the herd. Robert Bob was a little lazy. If Hinkle had thought he was shirking, his temper might have got the better of him. But it was hard to believe the cowman would have shot the Indian in the back.

Jim rode into the herd and encountered Dan. "Come with me," he said quietly. They rode on until they found Warjack.

"You know where Ben Digger went?" Jim asked.

"Mebbeso," Warjack replied. "What happen?"

"Robert Bob has been killed. Bert found him."

"Is bad," Warjack said. "Me see trouble coming up long time."

"We've got to find Ben," Jim said.

"Mebbe I find him," Warjack said noncommittally.

Jim shouted, "Everybody to the west

side of the herd. Pass the word. There's been a murder."

The word spread magically, and in five minutes most of the men were gathered in one place. Gus Hinkle, however, was not there.

"What's happened?" Verne Roddy asked. "Somebody said there'd been a murder."

"There's been one all right," Jim answered. "Come with me."

The men gathered around the dead Indian in silence. A few removed their hats, then put them back on as the snow got down their necks. Verne Roddy and Jim dismounted; the rest remained on their horses. Despite their prejudice against Indians they had nothing personal against Robert Bob, and the cowardly manner of his killing brought resentful oaths to their lips.

"Right through the back," Roddy told them. "He never had a chance. Probably never saw who shot him."

"Who the devil could've done it?" Bruce Cavenough asked.

"Where's your boss?" Roddy asked. "He's the man been claiming these Indians were thieves."

"See here," Cavenough said hotly, "are you accusing Gus of this?"

"No. I just want to hear what he has to say. Where is he?"

At that moment Gus Hinkle showed up out of the snow. "What's going on here?" he asked. "Why've you fellers left the herd?"

"Might ask you the same question," Roddy grated. "Where've you been?"

Hinkle rode close enough then to see the body, and his face took on a strange expression that to some, including Jim, looked like fear. "I just rode up the draw to cool off," he said.

Roddy laughed harshly and without merriment. "On a day like this? Most of us have been freezing to death."

"You know what I mean, damn you," Hinkle snarled.

"A little while ago you threatened me with your gun, and a few days ago you threatened to kill Jim McConnell. You've been grumbling about these Indians. It couldn't be you ran across this Injun kid out here and shot him in the back, could it?" Roddy questioned ironically.

"No, it couldn't," Hinkle yelled. "I ain't seen him all day."

"Mind letting us smell that old hog-leg of yours?"

There was plainly fear upon Hinkle's face now. For a moment it looked as if he might try to run. Then Bruce Cavenough and some of his other men crowded around him defensively.

"I don't have to show you anything," Hinkle said.

"Well, I'm not afraid to have somebody smell my gun," Roddy said. He unholstered the weapon and handed it over to Jim. Jim broke the gun and smelled of the barrel. It smelled of powder, but not strong; no stronger than Jim knew his own gun would smell.

"Well?" Roddy said.

"It's not been fired recently," Jim said.

Heb Parsons, a rep from Willow Creek, rode up to Hinkle and held out his hand. "You seem to be be the only man who was missing, Hinkle. How about a smell?" he said.

"You can't hang a man on that," Hinkle said desperately. "Sure you can smell powder because I just fired three shots at a coyote."

NOT a man there then who didn't look upon Hinkle as upon a guilty man. Out of the corner of his eye Jim saw Warjack edge out of the crowd and disappear.

"Yeah?" Roddy challenged. "That couldn't have been far away, and if you saw a coyote its tracks will still be there. Come on, show us."

"I'll show you nothing," Hinkle blazed. "I didn't shoot that Injun."

"All right, boys, what're we waiting for?" Roddy said. "We've got plenty of ropes."

Jim McConnell woke up then, and landed in the saddle. He could hardly make himself heard as the men began to scream curses. Even Hinkle's own men looked

uncertain. "Hold it, you fellows," Jim shouted. "There'll be no lynching bee here. Gus is entitled to a trial." He spurred over and joined Hinkle's men. Dan was right beside him. The rest of the Gooseneck crew hastened to join him, but two-thirds of the men were on the other side. For a minute it looked as if there was bound to be a clash.

Then Heb Parsons said, "Hinkle is guilty as hell, but Jim's right. We can't take the law into our own hands."

The mob spirit began to subside.

"Come on, some of you fellows, help Dan carry the body over to the wagons," Jim ordered, and there were plenty of volunteers.

"What about Hinkle?" Verne Roddy demanded. "You going to let him go free?"

"Yes—till the sheriff comes," Jim snapped. "If I know Gus he won't run away. Just to make sure, Heb Parsons will ride herd on him. Give me your gun, Gus."

Reluctantly Hinkle handed over his gun. "I'm telling the truth," he declared. "I didn't shoot no Injun."

Jim smelled the gun and it reeked with freshly burned powder. He handed it over to Parsons, who did the same, and then Roddy reached for it. "I may be called as a witness," Roddy said. "I wanta be sure." Then he gave the gun back to Jim.

JIM called out Leo White, a Gooseneck man, and sent him on the twenty-mile ride to the nearest town, where a telegram could be sent to the sheriff and coroner fifty miles or more farther on. It would be some time next day before they could arrive.

"If there's a deputy sheriff in Caribou," Jim told Leo, "have him come right out."

The snow was still falling intermittently, but Jim sent the men back to work. Hinkle and Parsons remained at the wagon, but Parsons told Jim later that when he had asked Gus to show him where he had shot at the coyote Gus had refused.

Perhaps the sobering effect of the tragedy was responsible, but the cutting proceeded faster than it had before.

Jim's mind was full of doubts. The evidence against Hinkle certainly seemed conclusive. The man's quarrelsome nature made it seem more probable, but there were eighty other men there, any one of whom might have done the shooting. Under cover of the storm almost any rider could have slipped away unnoticed. The shot would not have been heard above the bawling of the cattle.

Once he rode up to Bert. "Look here," he said, "you were the first to see the body. Are you sure that you didn't fire a shot that might have hit Robert Bob by accident?"

The kid looked at him reproachfully. "I'd have said so if that had happened," he answered. "Here, you wanta smell my gun?"

"No, I'll take your word. Just wanted to check up."

Later he saw Dan. Dan said, "I don't believe old Gus done it."

"Huh? Why not? You got any reasons?"

"Not a cussed one, except that I don't believe he'd shoot a man in the back. If he'd been goin' to shoot anybody he'd have shot Verne Roddy."

"You know what I've always said," Jim grinned wryly. "If you ever drown I'll look upstream for the body, you're that dang contrary."

"All right," Dan said. "You never got along with Gus, but I always did purty good. I know him better than you. I was up at the wagon a while ago an' Gus said, 'Dan, I didn't kill Robert Bob. I want *you* to believe me anyway'—and damn it, I do."

"Somebody did," Jim reminded.

"Look," Dan argued. "Supposin' he did? Why would he have rode on up the draw so he'd be sure to be missed. Why did he fire three shots and come back without wiping out his gun? If it had been me the first thing I'd have done would have been to git back in the herd before I was missed, and then I'd have give my gun a right good cleaning and reloaded."

Jim looked thoughtful. "You might have something," he admitted.

JIM was eager for Ben Digger's return, and yet he dreaded the moment. Ben was his friend, but lately there hadn't been the cordial relationship between them that had once existed. In a sense the three Indians were his guests, and he felt himself responsible for the treatment they received. Indians were funny; it was hard to tell what they were thinking.

Ben might make no sign, but he would take it hard. His grandson was the apple of his eye. He would probably feel hatred for every white man there, and he might try to exact instant vengeance from Gus Hinkle.

The cutting for the day had just been finished when Ben Digger and Warjack arrived. Jim had told Bruce Cavenough to look after the herd that had been cut out, and to post night guards. Part of the crew were driving the others in the opposite direction.

The snowstorm had stopped at last, and Jim rode out a little way to meet the two Indians.

"I'm sorry, Ben," he said.

"Robert Bob—he dead, huh?" Ben said.

"He's dead."

"White man shootum. Injun no can trust white man."

"White man who shot Robert Bob will die," Jim said. "Sheriff will hang him."

Ben shook his white head. "Injun shootum white man—sheriff hangum—white man shootum Injun, sheriff no can see good."

"Not this time, Ben. It looks like Gus Hinkle killed your grandson, but we can't be sure yet. Whoever it was, we'll get him."

Ben Digger's dark eyes flashed as he said, "Who shootum Robert Bob—me getum." The Indian's manner caused a small chill to pass up Jim's spine. Ben Digger meant what he said.

As the Indian dismounted, Gus Hinkle stepped away from Parsons and came to meet them. Jim tensed for action if Ben tried to kill the man. Gus said, "If I killed your grandson, Ben, I deserve to die, but I didn't do it." Ben Digger walked on past him without a word.

There was no flicker of expression on Ben's face as he looked down at his grandson for several minutes. Then he said, "Me take him."

Jim called on Warjack to help him explain that the body would have to remain until the sheriff and coroner arrived. Ben grunted a few times as Warjack explained in Shoshoni, but finally he turned away and went into the tent.

"His heart sad," Warjack stated.

Plainly, Ben Digger wasn't going to talk, but after supper Jim asked Warjack to walk out in the darkness with him. Dan joined them unobtrusively. Warjack was different from the other Shoshonis. He had been around white men much more, when he wanted to he spoke good English, and generallly he was fun-loving and congenial. Being a top cowhand, he had been hired by Ben Digger as a reservation rider, largely to serve as a go-between with the whites.

"Where did you find Ben?" Jim asked.

Warjack didn't answer at once. Finally he said, "You savvy hole in rock?"

"Sure." The hole-in-the-rock Warjack referred to was well known locally, a yawning chasm in the midst of an old volcanic region so covered with lava rock that as a rule the cowmen didn't even trouble to ride it for cattle, since a cow would have to be insane to stay there.

"Ben, he find Injun cows there," Warjack said.

"Huh?" The exclamation was surprised out of Jim. He hadn't taken much stock in Ben's claim that Indian cattle had been stolen. A few Indian dogeys did wander away with the white men's cattle. A few had already showed up, but never very many. On the contrary, many of the white men's cows wandered onto the reservation. But if Ben had found any consider-

able bunch here it could mean only that they had been rustled. "How many?" he asked.

"Mebbeso twenty. Injun brands blotched."

"Who the hell would bother to drive twenty head of cattle that far?" Jim said. "If they were going to steal at all looks like they'd have taken a bunch worth while."

"Ben he think more—mebbeso away over—in a swamp."

IN A swamp? There were various swamps in the country, but only one big one, a tulle covered area at the head of Miles Lake, a few miles distant. There were more or less dry islands in there on which cattle could graze, but they would have to be driven several miles through swamp to reach them. Jim had been in there at various times in the winter when he had crossed on ice, but he wouldn't hanker to go in there now.

"Them Injun cattle—they got new brand on now," Warjack volunteered.

"They have? Whose, for hell's sake?" Jim blurted.

"Gooseneck," Warjack said.

His own brand! Jim subdued the panic that swept over him. Warjack wasn't joking. Jim knew that none of his crew would have done such a thing. As for Syd Lyons, his employer, he had never tol-

He had been shot in the back and he was dead . . .

erated any claim to an animal where there was even reasonable doubt as to ownership. Besides, Lyons had too much to lose by antagonizing the Indians. Many of his cattle wintered on the swamps of the reservation.

This had suddenly gone further than the satisfaction of a petty grudge. Someone deliberately was trying to create the worst kind of danger on the range; deliberately trying to foster trouble between the Gooseneck and the Indians.

It would be easier, Jim knew, to work over an Indian brand into a Gooseneck than any of the other white men's brands. The iron didn't resemble the neck of a goose particularly; instead, it was modeled after the iron "gooseneck" on the end of a wagon tongue—two long parallel lines with a crook at the end and a V at the bottom. In general, the Indian brands resembled a snake track more than anything else, and no one but an Indian would have tried to read one. But many of them could be worked over into a Gooseneck.

Jim said quietly, "Nobody on the Gooseneck did that."

"If I thought so I not tell you about it," Warjack said.

"What about Ben?"

"He no say."

"Somebody is trying to frame us," Dan put in.

Jim said, "Dan don't think Gus Hinkle kil'ed Robert Bob. It could have been any one of seventy men. Whoever stole those cows may not even run cattle on this range at all." He was thinking at the moment of Heb Parsons, whose outfit ranged at the lower end of Miles Lake. He had known Parsons casually for five years, and liked the man, yet he really knew little about him. And there were plenty of other suspects, too.

"Hinkle pretty mean man—no like Injuns," Warjack stated stolidly.

That was true, and the man was greedy. It would be to his advantage to cause trouble for the Gooseneck.

"I still don't think he killed Robert Bob," Dan said, and gave his reasons why.

Jim said, "Unless Ben wants to tell the sheriff about this I'd like to keep this to ourselves for a while."

"Ben, he no talk," Warjack said positively.

THERE was no sleep for Jim McConnell that night. There in the same tent with him was a man whose heart was corroded with hatred because of the murder of his grandson. He had found cattle which on the face of things had been stolen by the outfit Jim represented—which meant him. In another tent, only a few feet away, was a man he had every reason to believe was the murderer. The situation was worse because Ben Digger had always been a friend of the white men.

Jim saw ruin and disgrace staring him in the face unless he could prove who had stolen the cattle. Syd Lyons would be through with him, and that meant Blanche would be through with him too.

Once in the night he saw Ben Digger get up, silent as a ghost, and step outside the tent. Jim went to the door of the tent and watched him, fearful he might have designs upon Gus Hinkle's life. But Ben only stood outside for half an hour looking at the stars, which were visible for the first time since the roundup started.

In the morning Jim got as many men to work as possible though many of them just wanted to hang around. He was without bosses as Hinkle couldn't leave, and Verne Roddy and Bruce Cavenough wouldn't. He sent out two crews instead of three, one under a rancher named Matt Bellamy, and the other under a Wineglass rider named Bill Whittaker. He sent Dan and Warjack out with Whittaker.

The sheriff and coroner arrived just before noon and looked the scene over. They questioned everyone, but Jim and Roddy were the chief witnesses. Their testimony was the same, but the interpretation differed. Roddy left no doubt in anyone's mind that he considered Gus Hinkle guilty. Jim dwelt upon the fact that there was no real evidence against Gus except that he was the only one known to have fired a gun.

"You mean someone else might have?" Sheriff Clark asked.

"There are at least fifty guns here, and we didn't examine them all," Jim said. "Even if we had there would have been mighty little powder smell left if the man had cleaned it right away."

"Hinkle, if you didn't shoot the Indian what did you shoot at?" the sheriff asked the suspected man.

"I shot at a coyote," Gus said stolidly.

"But nobody could find any coyote tracks," Roddy interjected. "I sent a couple of boys out to look. They followed Hinkle's tracks, but didn't see any of a coyote."

"It looks bad, Hinkle, unless you can come up with a better explanation," the sheriff said.

GUS HINKLE looked like a man goaded almost beyond endurance. "All right," he said, "I'll tell you. I was mad. Verne Roddy had been riding me ever since the roundup started. He accused me of trying to steal one of his steers, which was a damned lie. He done it to provoke me into starting a gun fight. He's faster than I am and would have killed me.."

"Well?"

"I rode away from the herd to cool off, but I kept wishing I had shot it out with him anyway. I wondered just how fast I was, so I drew my gun as quick as I could and fired three times at a small quaking asp tree."

"Did you hit it?" the sheriff shot out.

"I don't know. I know I hit it once."

"Can you find the tree?"

Hinkle hesitated. "I reckon I can," he said.

Hinkle had some difficulty finding the tree, but at last he did. It would have been better for him if he had not. There was one hole in the center of the trunk, another to one side, and that was all.

"I reckon I missed the first shot," Gus said.

"There's some question about that," the sheriff said dryly. "I'll have to take you in, Hinkle."

The cowman looked as if he still couldn't believe it. He began to mutter about his cows. He had no foreman, because he could never bring himself to trust anyone that much. Bruce Cavenough was his best man, but he had never given Bruce any real authority, and had grumbled when Jim McConnel had set Bruce to running one of the roundup crews. He had objected strenuously from the first to Jim's running the roundup. Now he seemed to think that he wouldn't have a cow left if he went to jail.

"Who's gonna look after my interests?" he demanded in bewilderment.

"I'll do the best I can," Jim promised, "but why don't you let Bruce represent you?"

Hinkle wouldn't commit himself; still seeming to think that he would be released as soon as he got to town.

Jim found himself walking beside Verne Roddy. "Kind of makes it tough for you, Jim," Roddy said. "If the old walrus is short a cow you'll get the blame."

"It's going to be a shock to Annie," Jim said, changing the subject.

"She's let the old devil run her life," Roddy said. "Maybe she'll wake up now and realize what an old hellion he is. But I'm still wondering why he killed that

Indian. Have you heard Ben Digger complain about losing any cattle?"

Jim knew that Ben Digger had mentioned the Indian losses only to him, but he wasn't being tricked into a betrayal of the Indian's confidence. "Ben's not been very talkative lately," he parried. "You think he may have lost some?"

"I don't know, but he acts damned funny. Between ourselves Hinkle has dragged a long rope ever since he was a pup. It wouldn't surprise me," Roddy said.

In a sense what Roddy had said was true. Jim didn't recall when Gus Hinkle had actually stolen an animal, but he had always been quick to claim any animal whose brand was doubtful. If he couldn't get away with it he had always insisted that it be thrown into a common pool and sold, even though someone else might present a reasonably good claim. The smaller fellows, the nesters, had suffered in this way; one of the reasons why they would never accept Hinkle as boss of the roundup.

Ben Digger wanted to lash the body of his grandson on a horse and take it back to the reservation, but the sheriff would not permit it. He promised Ben, however, that the body would be shipped back to the reservation from Caribou by train.

"You think he lie?" Ben asked Jim, the first time he had spoken to Jim since his return.

"I'm sure he will do what he says," Jim said.

"Then I go," Ben said.

Jim said, "Ben, Warjack tells me you found some of your cows at the Hole-in-the-rock with the Gooseneck brand on them."

"Me findum," Ben said dully.

"How many do you think you're short?"

"Mebbeso two hundred. Find twenty."

"Why don't you tell the sheriff?" Jim asked.

"Tellum sheriff you go to jail too, mebbe."

"Thanks, Ben. I didn't put that brand on. Neither did any other Gooseneck man," Jim said.

"Me never think so," Ben replied. "Injun catchum cowthief—no call sheriff," he added grimly.

THE roundup must go on. Jim gave up the idea of running three crews. It would take a little longer the other way, but it might avoid friction. One crew couldn't accuse another of not keeping up its end.

Hinkle's herd, with that of a group of little fellows, was already on its way and the eight or ten men with it wouldn't be back for a couple of days. Bruce Cavenough was in charge of that. Jim had no intention of going with them, but he did intend to go ahead of them and have a talk with Annie Hinkle and Syd Lyons. While he was gone he appointed Matt Bellamy to run the roundup.

Everyone wondered why he hadn't chosen Verne Roddy, yet there was a strong group which would have resented Roddy's appointment.

He said to Bellamy, "Matt, I've got a special job for Dan and Warjack, so don't bother about 'em."

To the two boys he said, "I want you to slip away without anybody seeing you and watch those cattle in the Hole-in-the-rock. Keep out of sight; just see if anybody shows up."

He told Bert he had better go back to the ranch with him, but the boy begged so hard that Jim finally let him stay. But Bert didn't like flunkying either, and he had secretly persuaded Dan to let him go along to Hole-in-the-rock.

Jim expected to break the news of her brother's arrest to Annie Hinkle, but she had heard it from one of the men who had pulled out from the trail herd, and the man had let her know that there was little doubt of her brother's guilt.

She was a pretty, blonde woman who always looked a little beaten down because of the tyranny of her brother, and

yet plainly she loved the man, and her eyes were red.

"I can't understand why Gus would do it," she said. "He hated Indians, and never would let me feed any of them, but his bark was always worse than his bite."

"We don't know for sure that he did it, Annie," Jim said. "I want to ask you something: did Gus have any bad enemies?"

Annie's face flushed as she answered, "I guess it would be easier to count his friends," she said. "Gus quarreled with a lot of people, but I don't think I ever saw him mad enough to kill anybody—except once." Her face got redder than ever.

"When was that?" Jim asked, feeling nervous about questioning a woman older than he was.

"It couldn't have anything to do with this," she said, "but one time Gus ordered Verne Roddy to stay off the ranch. Verne had been coming to see me, and Gus never liked him."

"This is none of my business, Annie, but if you were in love with Verne why didn't you marry him and leave with him if there was no other way?" Jim asked.

"You wouldn't understand, Jim. Gus has been more like a father to me than a brother. I know him better than anyone else, and maybe I know Verne Roddy better. But I would have gone with Verne if it hadn't been for one thing."

"What was that?"

"I can't tell you that. A woman has to keep some pride."

"I hate to pry, Annie, but believe it or not I'm trying to save Gus's life. It might be important," Jim said urgently.

"Well, if that's true, this is what happened. Gus accused Verne of wanting to marry me for money. He said he knew that if I married Verne, Verne would kill him so I'd inherit his property, and he said if I did go he would leave all he had to charity. Verne then said he wouldn't marry me under any conditions as long as Gus was alive. That's when Gus ordered him off. It just didn't leave me any choice," the woman said.

"And you're still in love with Verne Roddy," Jim said softly.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm weak, Jim, but Gus did convince me that he was right—that Verne Roddy was only after money."

"Thanks, Annie, and believe me what you've told me won't go any further," Jim said.

HE RODE on to the Gooseneck, got a kiss and a hug from Blanche, and then went into Lyons' private office.

"You wouldn't have left the roundup if it wasn't for something serious," Syd said. "I haven't told the folks, but I just heard that Gus Hinkle killed an Indian."

"It looks like he did—I'm not as sure as some others—but we've got other troubles." He told Lyons then about the Indian cattle with the blotched brands which Ben Digger had found in the Hole-in-the-rock. Excitement and anxiety showed in his employer's face.

"If that ain't cleared up it means big trouble for us on the reservation," Lyons said shakily. "Who's been riding there?"

"The crew Gus Hinkle bossed was closest, but those Indian cattle must have been in there a week or so."

"You got any suspicions?"

Jim felt better now that he knew his boss hadn't even considered the possibility that he might be guilty, although Syd's attitude didn't surprise him.

"I've nothing to go on yet, but we're watching the place."

He talked with Blanche and her mother a few minutes, then headed back to camp. Even if he had the complete confidence of the Lyons family he was keenly aware that he would be accused of stealing the cattle if they were found. If that happened there would be those who would think he might also be Robert Bob's murderer. Worse, they might suspect Dan, since he had had the better opportunity to kill the young Indian.

Things were coming right down to the wire now. The cattle would soon be discovered, and even the fine reputation they had with both whites and Indians might not be enough to save them.

Jim didn't reach camp until after dark, and learned that Dan and Warjack had not returned. He became more alarmed when he found out they had taken Bert with them.

Verne Roddy and Cash Caldwell, his right hand man, came up as he was eating a belated supper. "Where's your kid brothers and the other Injun?" Roddy asked. "Bellamy tells me they weren't riding with the outfit. Be too bad if another Injun showed up with a hole in his back, wouldn't it?"

"It would be too bad for somebody," Jim retorted.

"Where did you say they went?"

"I didn't say. I had special work for them."

"Well, if it's a deep dark secret I won't ask any more questions," Roddy laughed, and the men started away.

As they turned away Jim noticed something about them that struck him like a hammer blow. He started to ask them a question, but choked back the words. That moment he knew who had murdered Robert Bob—but he wasn't sure that he could prove it.

He would keep it to himself until Dan and the others returned, and he was plenty worried about them. The camp became quiet as the men rolled into their blankets, but Jim sat by a fire and kept it blazing as the hours passed. The storm seemed to be over at last, but it had turned cold and a bitter wind lashed out from the northwest.

It was hard to keep from going out to search for his brothers, but the only effective way to do that was to call out the whole crew, and that would necessitate telling where the boys had been. If they didn't return by morning he would have to do it.

At half past one he heard them, and a little later they appeared in sight, each one riding straight in the saddle, even Bert, who should have been dead for sleep. A deep sigh escaped him. He had been mortally afraid one of them had been hurt.

"Little Badger hasn't attended a tribal dance in six months!"

"WHERE the devil have you fellows been?" he demanded sternly, but he put his arm around Bert as the boy slid to the ground.

"Punching cows," Dan said dryly. "Me and Warjack moved that bunch out of Hole-in-the-rock and drove 'em through the swamp to an island in the middle of Miles Lake."

"Why did you do that? That can't help us any."

"Dunno. Warjack thought it might be a good idea to shove 'em in with the rest of the stolen Indian cattle."

"The rest? What you talkin' about?"

Warjack said laconically, "Ben Digger he see old tracks in mud and find mebbe two, three hundred head on island. They still there."

"With the Gooseneck brand on 'em?"

"No, just Injun brands."

"If Ben knew that, why didn't he say so?" Jim asked. "If he thought we were stealing his cattle—"

"Ben no think so. He say you, Syd Lyons, good friends of Injun. He want to see who come after cows," Warjack said.

"I saw something too," Bert volunteered. "They left me to watch Hole-in-the-rock. While I was hid up two men

come poking around in the lavas. They acted surprised when they missed the cows. They fooled around a little, then followed the tracks down to the tulles, then high-tailed back toward camp."

"Was it Roddy and Caldwell?" Jim asked.

Bert looked his surprise. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Just guessed. I found out today that one of them killed Robert Bob." Pledging them to secrecy he told them why he suspected the men, but Warjack and Dan had been convinced of their guilt from the moment they knew Roddy and Caldwell had been looking for the cattle.

"You'd better get to bed, Bert," Jim said kindly. "Didn't you get pretty cold?"

"Oh, I built up a big fire when it come dark and these two slowpokes didn't get back," Bert said. "And when they did we stopped a while so Warjack could show us how the Indians make talk by waving a blanket in front of a fire."

Jim looked searchingly at the Indian. Warjack shrugged and remarked, "Kid stuff."

Jim wondered. He sent Bert to bed, and contrived to have a word with Dan. "Did you see any answer to those signals Warjack made?" he asked.

"Didn't see a thing," Dan said, "but that doesn't mean they weren't seen."

JIM remembered that Ben Digger had promised he would deal with the killer of his grandson in his own way. By now Warjack was convinced that Verne Roddy was responsible for the theft of the Indian cattle, and by implication he would suspect the man of the murder. It would be too bad for Roddy now if he fell into the hands of the Indians.

There was no lingering doubt in Jim's mind that Roddy was guilty on both counts, but it might be hard to prove. At any rate, he felt that he would have to show his hand in the morning. If he were believed, Roddy would stand trial for murder. If his case failed he and Dan were certain to be arrested for stealing Indian cattle.

He could understand Roddy's motives now. The theft of the Indian cattle had been merely incidental, although it might net him a tidy sum. The twenty head with the brands worked over would discredit the Gooseneck, and with Gus Hinkle under arrest for murder, Roddy would be the dominant figure on the range. That was no little thing, but doubtless Roddy was gunning for still bigger game. If Gus Hinkle were hanged, or sent to prison for life, his sister Annie would have the C Bar C, and there was no reason for Roddy to suppose that he could not marry her, once her brother was out of the way.

It was possible that Roddy at first had planned to murder Gus Hinkle, but the snowstorm had given him an opportunity to kill an Indian and put the blame on Hinkle instead. In so doing he had tied up Hinkle, the Indians, and the Gooseneck in one handy package that served his interests in every way. Yet he had made one little error which might prove his undoing.

AT THE rope corral next morning the men stood around waiting orders for the day. Only then did Jim discover that Verne Roddy and Cash Caldwell were missing.

He called Bill Whittaker over. "Where's Roddy and Caldwell?" he asked.

"Dunno," the rider said. "They was up and gone before I rolled out."

Jim looked at Warjack. Any other Indian would have been expressionless, but there was just a faint smirk of satisfaction on Warjack's face.

"Everybody follow me," Jim shouted. "We're going to Miles Lake."

"To Miles Lake?" Matt Bellamy said. "Are you crazy? There's no cows there."

"It happens there is," Jim answered. "At least two hundred head that have been stolen from the reservation. What's more, the brands on some of 'em have been worked over into a Gooseneck."

"Into a Gooseneck?" Bellamy said in-

credulously. "You asking us to believe you fellows have been stealing Injun cattle, and are taking us out there to prove it?"

"No. We're going out there to find Roddy and Caldwell, and I only hope we find 'em alive."

"I don't get it," Bellamy said. He was a stubborn man who always wanted a reason for everything. "Better explain yourself."

Jim turned to Heb Parsons, and said, "Heb, when I smelled Roddy's gun after Robert Bob was killed you were standing right there. I'd never noticed what kind of gun he was carrying before, but did you notice what the handle plates were like?"

"Why, yes," Parsons said, puzzled. "They were black bone with little grooves in 'em. What of it?"

"It wasn't the gun Roddy was wearing yesterday. That one had a dark brown walnut handle, worn smooth, but Caldwell was wearing the gun Roddy showed us when Robert Bob was killed."

"All right. What does that prove?" Bellamy wanted to know.

"First, I want to ask Bill Whittaker if I'm not right," Jim said. "Isn't it true, Bill, that the black-handled Colt's belongs to Caldwell and the brown-handled one to Roddy?"

The Wineglass puncher looked nervous and frightened. "I don't know what this is leading up to," he said, "but I guess that's right."

"Then why was Roddy wearing Cash's gun?" Jim demanded. "I remember Cash saying he was glad he wasn't wearing a gun that day. Did anybody else hear him?"

"I did," Heb Parsons said, and four or five other men concurred.

"This is what happened," Jim told them. "Roddy picked a row with Gus Hinkle, and Gus rode up the draw to cool off and fired three shots to ease his feelings. Cash Caldwell was probably trailing him and heard the shots. He came back and told Roddy, and Roddy rode out and killed Robert Bob."

"Hey, how do you know all that?" Bill Whittaker demanded.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Bill," Jim said. "At least not yet. In that snowstorm anybody could leave the herd without being seen, let alone being recognized. When Roddy came back he changed guns with Cash Caldwell so there wouldn't be any burned powder smell in the gun he was wearing. That's why he was so anxious for us to smell it. And Caldwell slipped into the tent with Roddy's gun, and then told everybody he saw how glad he was not to be packing one."

"You're still only guessing," Bellamy said.

"Not exactly. Whittaker says it was Cash's gun, and Heb Parsons saw what kind it was. Roddy figured that in the excitement nobody would notice that it wasn't his. If he had kept on carrying Caldwell's gun nobody would."

"I don't give a damn," Bill Whittaker said angrily, "I'll bet Verne can explain it."

"Maybe he can, but he'll have to explain too why he knew those Indian cows with the doctored brands were hid up in Hole-in-the-rock," Jim said grimly. "We'll ride through the swamp over to an island in the lake and ask him. Come on."

HE KNEW that there was a possible explanation, and Roddy would be sure to think of it. The man would say that in dressing that morning he had gotten hold of Caldwell's gun in the dark without noticing the difference. Caldwell would bear him out by claiming that the reason he hadn't worn one was because he had been unable to find his weapon.

If Jim's surmise was correct it would be to his interest to delay getting to the lake, but he led the way at a steady gallop. Dan, white-faced but determined, rode beside him.

Jim pulled up at the shore of the lake. The tracks of the cattle where Dan and Warjack had driven them into the swamp were still plain. So were the tracks of two men who had entered the swamp only a few hours ago.

Roddy and Caldwell had had their

hands forced by the moving of the cattle. They had gone to the island to make sure the animals were still there. When they returned they would tell about their find, and claim they had seen Dan and Warjack driving the cattle into the swamp the day before. They would lose the animals on the island they had expected to pick up later, but the McConnell boys and Warjack would have no defense against the charge of rustling.

The odds in favor of Roddy and Caldwell, as Jim saw them, were at least two to one, but without hesitation he plunged his horse into the swamp and yelled, "Come on."

It was hard going. The water varied from knee-deep to their horses up to the saddle-skirts, and sometimes the animals sank deep into the mud and had to struggle to move at all. At all times the tules waved around the riders' heads.

They were all grimly silent now, knowing that something dramatic awaited them. It took nearly two hours to reach the island, and Jim could understand why Dan and Warjack had been so late.

At last they clambered up on the dry island they had been looking for. They saw the Indian cattle, including some that carried the blotched looking Gooseneck, but no sign of the men they were looking for.

"Didn't you have time to work all them brands over?" Bill Whittaker asked caustically. He and the other Wineglass men were keeping well apart from the others. Whether any or all of them had been in the rustling deal Jim couldn't even guess.

Without replying Jim rode toward the willows that covered much of the island and presently found a trail. The others followed single-file.

Suddenly he came to an open place, and saw at least twenty Indians sitting in a circle. Their horses were tied nearby. To Jim's surprise Ben Digger was with them.

THE INDIANS stood up as the white men moved into the open. Their faces were devoid of all expression. Jim was first to speak. "I see you found your cattle, Ben," he said.

"Me findum," Ben said curtly.

"Have you seen anything of Verne Roddy and Cash Caldwell?"

"No seeum."

Jim looked around, a strange, horrified feeling in his breast. There were miles and miles of tule swamp surrounding this island. In places the water was deep. Two men and two horses could disappear forever in that swamp, and no one would ever find them. Roddy and Caldwell had come onto that island, *but they were not there.* He knew that every man there was feeling much as he did.

"You know who stole these cattle, Ben?" Jim asked, and knew that the answer could determine his own fate.

"Me know," Ben said. "Me findum Injun cattle with Gooseneck brand five days ago. Me know Gooseneck no brandum."

"Why the devil would anybody else put a Gooseneck iron on 'em?" Bill Whittaker shouted, his voice cracking.

"Mebbe you know," Ben said, unperturbed. "Me findum place where fire built to heat irons. We findum this, too." He held up an empty package of Fatima cigarettes. Every man there knew that only Verne Roddy smoked that brand.

Jim turned to Bellamy and Parsons. "Are you satisfied?" he asked softly.

"We're satisfied," both men agreed.

For some reason everybody was looking at Bill Whittaker. There was still a shocked expression on his face. He began to jabber, "I don't know a thing aout it. I guess Roddy killed the Injun the way you say he did, for I know him and Cash were wearing their own guns at breakfast. And if they killed Robert Bob maybe they did brand the cattle too, but me and the other boys had nothin' to do with it."

"Well," Jim said, "let's get back to the roundup."

No Indian other than Warjack would have discussed the case with a white man, but he talked freely to Jim and Dan later in the day.

"Ben Digger he know all time who steal cattle," he said, "but he no know

who shoot Robert Bob, so he wait till he get chance to talk to Roddy. When he do, Cash Caldwell tell him Roddy kill Robert Bob."

It required little imagination to guess how Caldwell had been persuaded, nor what had happened to Roddy.

"Cash he try to get through to other side of lake," Warjack added with a little laugh. "Mebbeso he make it."

JIM and Dan breathed a little easier. At least Cash Caldwell had had a chance for his life. If he made it across the lake he would never be seen in the country again. It was the Indian way of meting out justice.

"I thought Ben Digger went to meet the train," Jim said.

"Lots of Injuns can meet train," Warjack shrugged. "Ben he get more Injuns and come back. When I give him signal he go wait in swamp. Everything all right now."

The roundup proceeded smoothly enough after that. When it was over Jim went to call on Annie and Gus Hinkle. For once in his life old Gus was friendly.

"You done a good job, Jim," he said. "From now on I'll always vote for you to run the roundup."

Jim didn't care about that. He was looking at Annie, and there was stark tragedy in her eyes.

"Do—do—you think Verne suffered much?" she asked.

"Suffered?" Jim said, and forced a laugh. "Not unless he caught cold swimming across the lake. The Indians told me they let him and Caldwell go when they promised never to come back to this country. You see, Annie, they didn't know then that Roddy had killed Robert Bob."

He felt that the lie was justified when he saw the relief that came over her face. She had suffered enough without thinking that the man she loved had been tortured and killed.

He rode on toward the ranch and Blanche. At least there was no tragedy to mar their lives.

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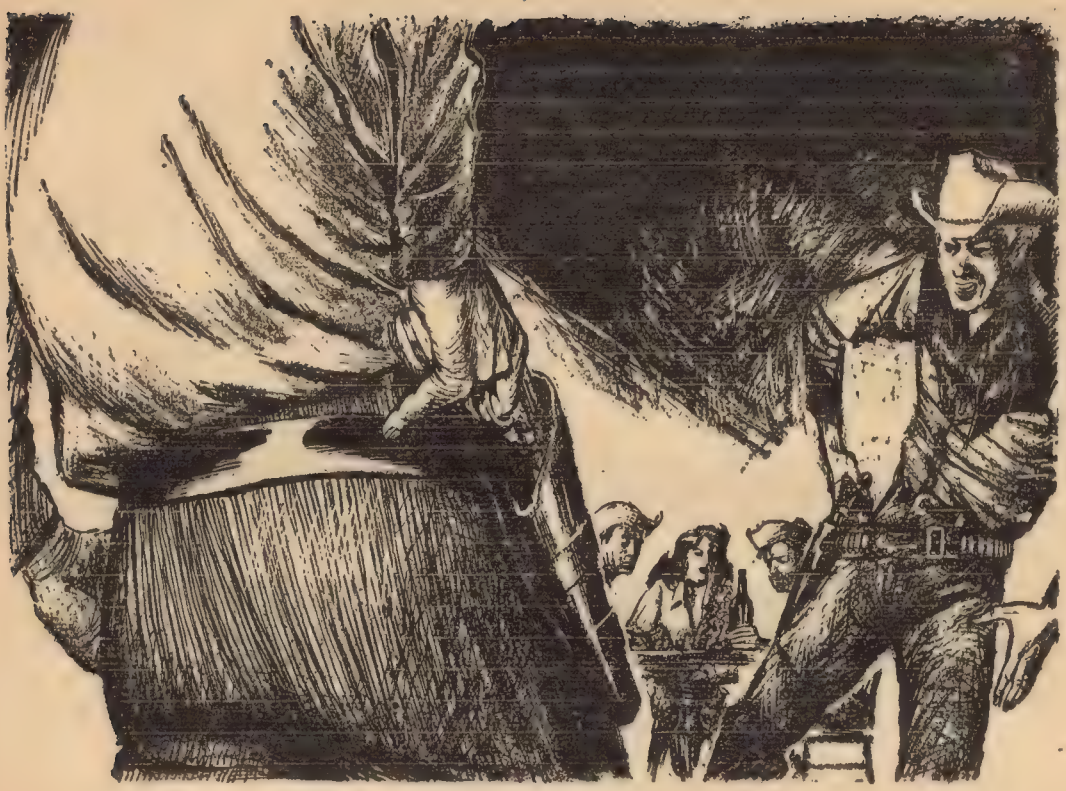

And then it came . . .

The Last Assignment

By H. A. DeROSSO

He was forty-two and tired, but he found that no matter how tired you may be, there's always just one more river to cross . . .

I HAD worked for the Cattlemen's Association for fifteen years and now I was forty-two years old and tired of it all. So I went in to headquarters at Cerro Alto and told Wade Wyatt, the secretary, I was quitting. Wyatt said all right but there was one more job he'd like me to do. It was an easy job, Wyatt said, and I should clean it up and quit. I never was very good at arguing so I rode out of Cerro Alto on my last assignment.

I went to the San Andres Mountains in the southern part of the territory. That was where Art Mulholland ran his Frying Pan iron. It was Mulholland who had written in to the Association, complaining that rustlers were running off his stock.

I rode in to Frying Pan like a drifter riding the grub-line. I never was much for looks and now with forty-two years behind me and a paunch and a brown, drooping mustache and a week's growth

of beard I looked like a bum and nothing else. I went up to the house where Art Mulholland was standing in front of the steps, watching me come up. He stood about six foot, which was four inches taller than me, and he looked lean and hard and capable.

I said, "I'm Joe Winter from the Association at Cerro Alto. I want you to pretend that you've hired me to punch cows for you. I don't want any one to know who I really am. I think I can work better that way."

"Slow Joe Winter?" said Mulholland, staring at me like he didn't believe what he saw and heard.

"The same," I said. I had a lot of luck those fifteen years with the Association. I usually plugged along, never getting excited or disgusted, and in time everything worked out all right.

But things like that have a way of growing and I guess that after all those years people who had never seen me but had heard about me, had the idea that I was a superhuman sort of an hombre and that I looked every bit like one.

I palmed my credentials and gave Mulholland a peek at them and that convinced him. He saddled a grulla mare and then told the cook he was putting me right to work, hunting strays. Then me and Mulholland rode away.

AS WE rode, Mulholland explained the lay-out to me. "I can tell you the names of a couple of the rustlers," he said. "Anyways, I'm pretty sure they're the rustlers but I can't prove it.

"There's young Bud Landers, a smart-aleck who fancies himself a second Billy the Kid," Mulholland went on. "Then there's Jeff Smallwood who's got a shack up in the mountains. He pretends to be a wolfer but that's just a blind. I suppose there's one or two more in the bunch and one of them is the kingpin. It shouldn't be too difficult for you, Slow Joe," he said.

He made it sound like a compliment. I just grunted.

"They don't run off too many head at a time," said Mulholland. "They're smart that way. They get hold of three-four strays and drive them off and hide them somewhere in the mountains." He waved an arm at the naked peaks of the San Andres range. "Then when they've got about a hundred head, they probably drive them south across the Border and sell them. That's the way I've got it figured out but, like I said I haven't been able to get any proof and Landers and Smallwood just laugh at me."

"Well, I'll see what I can do, Mulholland," I said.

"I think you've got a good idea," he told me, "working under cover like this. I'll do what I can to help you along. I'll let every one know I've put you up here keeping strays from drifting too far. That'll give you a good chance to look around." He looked at me and winked. "Maybe you could even run off a few head and pretend you're doing some rustling yourself. That could get you in with Landers and Smallwood. Or shouldn't I tell you how to do your job, Slow Joe?"

"That's all right, Mulholland," I said. "I'm always willing to use help. I'm not too swift with my mind. That's why they call me 'Slow,' " I said, trying not to sound too dry.

The San Andres Mountains were a barren, lonely range. I rode those wastelands for a week but nothing came of it. I spotted a few strays and hustled them down into the foothills and on Frying Pan range. Then I thought I'd try what Mulholland had suggested. I roped and tied a couple of strays and then I heated my running iron and changed the Frying Pan brand into the Table Top. But that didn't get me anything, either.

I seemed to be the only hombre up here in these barren wastes. If rustlers had been active up here, they had suddenly knocked off. It was almost as if they knew an Association man was on the job.

SEVEN days later, I rode in to a small settlement in the mountains. The place had a couple of saloons and I felt like a few beers to take the dryness and the dust out of my throat.

I was working on my second glass of beer when I heard riders pulling up out-

side. The swing doors popped open and in they walked.

There were four of them. Three men and a woman. At first, I thought she was a man, too, for she was wearing levis and a man's shirt and a wide-brimmed, flat-crowned stetson and there was a six-shooter in a holster at her side. Halfway across the barroom, she took the hat from her head and then her black hair spilled down on either side of her face, the dark, curling ends of it just brushing her shoulders and I knew she was a woman and a very beautiful one, too.

She walked over to a table that was next to the far wall and sat down. I was so busy watching her that a couple minutes passed before I realized that one of the hombres with her had come up to the bar and was standing there not five feet from me, watching me. When I took my eyes away from her and looked at him, he was grinning very wide.

"Hello, Slow Joe," he said.

I went cold inside. Now I knew why those rustlers had knocked off, why they had left the wastes of the San Andres to me and my sorrel. They had known all along who I was because this grinning hombre in front of me was Ed Fairchild, who I had sent up for rustling on another job four-five years ago.

I took another sip of beer and then I said, "Hello, Ed. They treat you right in the pen?"

"Right as rain," he said, still grinning. "I've been out for a couple years. I hear tell you're working for Frying Pan. They say you go by the name of Pierce."

"That's right," I said. "I got tired of working for the Association. I got tired of that Slow Joe Winter handle. Now I'm Tom Pierce, cowpoke, and I love every minute of it."

"You've dropped kind of low," said Fairchild. "Chasing strays. Not even a top hand. You've slipped a long way, Slow Joe." Then he winked at me. "Or are you building yourself a herd on the sly? Table Top, maybe?"

"Who, me?" I said. "I'm an honest man, Ed."

The smile went from Fairchild's face. "I guess you're right, Slow," he said quietly. "You'll never be anything but an honest man!"

I said, "What about you, Ed? You learn your lesson or are you still trying to cash in on another man's beef crop?"

"I get along," he said, his face growing dark.

One of the other hombres who had come in with the woman moved up beside Fairchild and told Fairchild to get. Fairchild went.

THIS HOMBRE was pretty young and quite a dandy. The gun at his right hip was an ivory-handled .45. The tip of his holster was tied down low on his thigh.

The kid was blond and he had small, mean, blue eyes that were insolent while they looked me up and down. "So you're Slow Joe Winter?" he sneered. "You don't look like much to me."

"I save my money, sonny," I told the kid. "I put it in the bank instead of blowing it all to dress myself up like a Christmas tree."

The kid flushed. It was almost like I had slapped him in the face. "You looking for trouble, Slow Joe?" he cried.

"Did I talk to you first?" I asked him.

"You don't know who I am," he said, "or you wouldn't be so flippy with me. You never hear of Bud Landers?"

"Landers?" I said. "The squirt who wants to be a second Billy the Kid? After all, Billy Bonney was just a yellow squirt who never pulled a gun on a man unless his back was turned. I knew Billy a long time ago, but I'm still alive and Billy's dead."

"You calling me yellow, Slow Joe?" Landers cried, his face red with rage.

I took my eyes off him for a second and looked at those who had come in with Landers. But I didn't trust the kid for more than a second because I knew what he had in mind. So I put my eyes back on him but when I spoke it was to his pals.

"I don't want trouble with this kid. You know me, Fairchild. Call the kid off."

"No one's calling me off," snarled the boy, and I could see he told the truth. He was rodding this roundup. "You just called me yellow, Slow Joe Winter," he went on, his eyes getting meaner all the time. "You taking that back?"

I WISHED there was something I could do, something I could say, to stop it. But he was like all kids his age. They can't get it into their heads that maybe the other hombre is a little bit better than they are.

"How old are you, kid?" I asked.

"Twenty-one."

"And I'm forty-two. How do you think I managed to get this old?" I asked him. "I've been in tough spots before but I've come through all of them. Do you think it was just because I'm lucky? They call me 'Slow' because of the way I think and the way I move, kid. They don't call me 'Slow' because of the way I use an iron. Now go over there with your friends and we'll all forget about what was said here. How about it?"

He threw a laugh right in my face. "You're scared!" he jeered, and I could see that he really believed it. "You're trying to talk me out of it because you're scared and yellow. Slow Joe Winter," he said, his mouth curving in a sneer. "You're forty-two years old and you've slowed up and that's why you're scared and yellow. Go on and draw, Slow Joe. I'll let you pull first." He threw that ugly laugh at me once more.

Again I tried making the kid's pals see sense but this time I didn't take my eyes off Landers, not even for a second. "One of you put a hobble on this damn fool kid," I said to them. "You, Fairchild. You know what I can do with an iron. Dab a loop on this crazy fool and drag him out of here."

"Damn fool, am I?" screamed the kid. "Crazy, am I?"

And then it came.

I saw his arm start its movement and I drew. I guess he had a reason for being so cocksure because he was really fast. He got that ivory-handled six-shooter out in a flash and for the part of a second I saw the big bore gawping at me but by then my own .44 was out and thrown down. I put a slug in his chest and he went slamming back and all at once he tripped over his big, fancy spurs and sat down with a stupid, hurt look on his face. He sat like that for half a minute, and then he fell over on his side. He was dead before his head hit the floor.

I had my .44 on his pals, but they weren't having any part of the kid's argument. Fairchild and the other gent looked shocked, like they had been pretty sure the kid was good enough to take me. They couldn't believe it was him dead on the floor instead of me. I knew now it had been a put-up job to get me out of the way. These were my rustlers, right in front of me, but I still had to prove it.

The woman was really cool about it. She laid a pair of clear, gray eyes on me and she looked at me like she was really seeing me for the first time. She looked at me like that for maybe a minute. Then when she had my measure, she got to her feet and, without once looking at the kid dead on the floor, she walked out of there. Fairchild and the other hombre followed.

There was the sick feeling in me that I would see this woman again.

SHE showed up two days later. I was back riding those empty, wasted heights of the San Andres. I just kept moving around, finding nothing, no sign of any Frying Pan stock being run off, not even a hoofprint of some innocent rider just drifting through. The only marks I ever came across were those made by my sorrel when I rode back the way I had come.

I was on high ground when I noticed the rider below me, working up a sharp slope toward the spot where I had reined in the sorrel. So I stepped off to the ground and sat down on a rock and began fanning my face with my hat.

She came up, riding a piebald mare. She stopped the mare beside my sorrel and then she stepped down and came ahead a little and stood there staring at me. We didn't say anything. We just looked at each other.

This time there was nothing else to distract me and I really gave her the eye. She was maybe five foot six which made her almost as tall as me. She was slim and dark. The skin of her face was burned a nut brown by the wind and sun and there were squint lines at the edges of her eyes. I guess it was her eyes that struck me most of all. They were a clear, sparkling gray. Those eyes looked twice as bright and sharp against the darkness of her face.

"You've got a hell of a way of making a living, Slow Joe," she said to me. Her voice was low and throaty.

"I don't mind," I said, putting my hat back on my head.

She made a small, disgusted motion with her hand. "Don't you ever get tired of this?" she asked. "This is no life for a decent man to lead. All alone like this. Don't you have a home, Slow?" she said, her voice getting lower, fuller. "Don't you have a wife and kids?"

I could feel it start in me, the thing I wanted to have but the thing I had begun to believe I'd never have. I hated to think about it because it was no good hurting myself with thoughts of it. I hated any one bringing it up.

I pretended it made no difference to me. "I'm used to it," I said. "I've never lived any other way." I tried to change the subject. "Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Sandra Martin. Everyone calls me Sandy. You can, too, Slow."

"What are you doing here?"

She showed a faint smile. "Don't you trust me, Slow? I live farther down the mountain. I run a poverty spread my dad left me when he died. I'm all alone, too, Slow."

"Alone?" I said. "What about Fairchild and that other hombre? What about Landers?"

Talking about the dead kid seemed to make no difference to her. "Can't I have any friends, Slow?" she said. "Ed Fairchild is a friend of mine. So is Jeff Smallwood. So was Bud Landers."

"I sent Ed Fairchild to the pen for rustling. Is that the kind of friends you have, Sandy?"

"Can't a man change? Fairchild is trying to go straight. He's learned his lesson but he has that prison record and no one will give him a break. He made his mistake and he's paid for it. I think Ed Fairchild is all right."

"He's nothing but a cheap, penny-ante rustler," I said, angry at something but not knowing exactly what, "and he'll never be anything else. What about Landers?" I said, looking at her narrowly. "I killed him and he was your friend. Yet here you are passing the time of day with me."

"Sure," she said, tossing her head a little, "I liked him. He courted me. He wanted me to marry him but he was too young for me. Besides, I didn't love him. But even if I had, should I hold his death against you, Slow? He started it. He reached first. You got him fair and square. So why cry about it? That's the way Bud wanted it."

NOW she came up to me and stooped over a little. She reached out and fingered the front of my shirt where I'd lost a button. "You're just like all men who don't have a woman," she said huskily. "You go around without buttons and rips in your shirts and pants. Do you mind if I sew on this button, Slow?"

She didn't wait for me to say anything. She sat down on the rock next to me and pressed me over a little to make room for herself. Then she dug in a pocket of her levis and came out with a tiny cloth bag from which she took a needle and thread and a button. This was the only feminine thing about her, this and her warmth as she sat there close to me.

I didn't say anything while she sewed on the button. My throat was parched. She bent her head and with her teeth snipped off the thread. Then she straightened, put away her needle and thread, and threw a bright smile at me. "There. Isn't that better, Slow?"

I couldn't say anything. I looked away from her. She put a hand on my arm.

"Don't you ever miss not having a woman, Slow?" she asked.

"I don't have any trouble getting any."

"I don't mean it that way. I mean a woman and a home. Every man should have that, Slow." She pressed a little closer. "Don't you think you'd like something like that?"

I tried to be light about it but it didn't go, not in my heart anyway. "I suppose I'll get around to it someday. I'm not so young any more but I suppose I'll find a widow with a bunch of kids and make up for it that way."

YOU'RE not so old, Slow," she said. "Not for me, you aren't."

I turned and looked at her. She had her face lifted a little toward me. I did not have far to go to pull her against me and put my mouth down on hers. I'd have done it, too, except for what I felt in my heart. It would be no good for me, I told myself.

When I didn't speak, she went on, "I'm not so young myself any more, Slow. I'm twenty-six. I'm an old maid. Maybe that's why I'm so shameless. I'm afraid of being left alone the rest of my life."

"You decided about me kind of sudden, didn't you?"

She drew back a little and looked at me like she was angry. "You make me sick, Slow Joe," she said. "You've got it in your head because you're forty-two and no picture of beautiful manhood that no woman could look at you and care about you. Do I look high and mighty, Slow? Look at me. Look at the clothes I wear. Look at the friends I have. Am I so stuck-up that I'd only go for the pretty-picture hombres? I want a home of my own and a man who's quiet and steady, not a young heller full of vinegar who'd go chasing around. I want you, Slow Joe Winter!"

Then she calmed down. She reached up and touched my cheek with her hand. Even through the stubble of beard I could feel its coolness and tenderness. "Do you figure on working for the Association all your life, Slow?"

"This is my last assignment," I said.

"Oh? And what are you going to do when you're through here?"

"I've got a little ranch that I just bought up north. I'm going to be a cattleman."

"All alone, Slow?" she said, her hand touching my cheek again. "Are you going to stay on that ranch all alone?"

I could feel my lips tighten. "That's right."

"Won't you take me with you, Slow?"

I grabbed her by both arms and squeezed so tight she winced. "Don't make fun of me, Sandy," I growled. "Never kid an old man about being in love with a young woman. If you know what's good for you, don't make fun of me!"

Two teardrops squeezed out of her eyes. "Oh, Slow, Slow," she moaned, "how can I make you believe, Slow? I love you.

HOT LINES

PATROLLING high tension power lines across desert country in the West, by plane and truck, is a never-ending duty. Birds make this a necessity in many cases, because the feathered citizens insist on building their nests on the crossarms of the poles. Eagles, ravens and crows are the worst offenders. These nests attract bobcats which skin up the poles to rob them and disrupt the power system.

Linesmen use "hot sticks" to destroy these nests. And sometimes they use them as weapons because the powerful eagles object to having their nests destroyed! ***—Ferris Weddle***

I'm not kidding you. I really love you. I know it's sudden and all that but it's the way I honestly feel about you. Won't you take me away with you, Slow? Now? Let's not wait for this silly job to end. You've slaved enough for the Association. Call it quits right now and take me to your ranch. I'll be good to you, Slow. You'll never regret it. Will you take me, Slow? Will you?"

I plugged along for eleven more days and then I found it. Maybe it was luck.

ANYWAY, I found the place where those stolen Frying Pan cows were held until they were ready to be driven over the Border. I'll admit they picked a good place for it.

On this day I stopped to water my sorrel and refill my canteen at the foot of a waterfall high in the San Andres. I'd passed this way before and I'd returned this time only because of the water which was not too plentiful in these mountains.

While the sorrel rested, I stood and watched that waterfall. I thought that behind the shimmering of the water there was something. So, with my heart beating loud and excited in me, I went in close to the waterfall, close enough for the spray to get me all wet, and there I saw it.

Behind the falling water, there was a hole in this high palisade of rock, a natural tunnel.

I grabbed the sorrel's reins and then I led him through the sheet of water and into the tunnel. It was maybe fifty feet long and then it opened out on the prettiest little basin I'd ever seen.

Naked crests ringed this tiny round valley but farther down those slopes the green growth of trees began and down here in the basin the grass was thick and rich. Its smell almost gagged me. I rode through the basin and counted thirty-three head of cattle. They carried the Tied Circles brand but that didn't mean anything. There isn't much difference between Tied Circles and Frying Pan.

IN RUNNING a Frying Pan brand, you burn a round circle and then you burn a straight line out from the circle's edge—the circle is the pan and the straight line is the handle. That's your Frying Pan. To run the Tied Circles brand, all you have to do is burn another circle at the end of the handle on the Frying Pan.

I had my evidence now. All I had to do was wait until the rustlers showed up. It stood to reason that no one would come through that tunnel except those who had run off these cows. That should be enough to hold up in court.

I waited through the rest of that day. The sun went down and the air got cold. I took my denim jacket out of my pack and put the coat on. I hugged my hands inside the flaps of my jacket to keep them warm. I did not dare build a fire for that might warn anyone coming through the tunnel—if anyone came.

Of that I could not be sure. There was no need for any one to show up here. The cows were all right. They had graze and water. However, I supposed that whoever had brought these cows here would show up every once in a while to check them over. Maybe they'd come tonight, maybe tomorrow, maybe not for a week. But I was going to wait.

THE MOON came up, and the light it threw made it almost as clear as day. Around midnight, I thought I heard the clump of hoofbeats in the tunnel.

I got up, stiff and aching, drew my .44. I was scared, not of any shooting or dying that might lie ahead, but of what I might find out. It put a cold lump in my throat.

I waited with the boulder giving me cover of a sort. They came out of the tunnel talking soft and laughing among themselves. The three of them passed my boulder and then I stepped out behind them with my .44 cocked and said:

"All right, partners, here's where you check your irons."

But they were having no part of a thing like that. All three of them reached for their guns. I didn't wait. I started blazing away as fast as I could.

I dropped the first one without a sound coming out of him. He just folded over his saddlehorn and then slid off the side of his rearing bronc. The second one I

plugged began screaming, holding both hands over his throat. He screamed all the way he fell to the ground and he screamed some more there before he quit for good. But I didn't have much time to listen to him. I was going after the third and last rider.

This third one had his horse turned and aimed at me and now he dug in his spurs and sent the bronc bolting ahead to ride me down. I only caught a glimpse of this one's shoulder behind the bronc's head and I threw a slug there and then I had to try to jump out of the way of that horse. Even so, one fore shoulder of the bronc hit my back and sent me smashing on my face and then I heard the pound of the bronc's hoofs racing through the tunnel.

I jumped to my feet, expecting to find the third one gone with his bronc, but my slug had knocked this rider out of his saddle. I saw the huddled figure on the ground. I heard a stifled moan and I could see this one hugging his smashed shoulder. I went up and peered and saw it was Sandy Martin.

SHE DIDN'T say anything while I tied up her shoulder. She moaned with pain a few times but that was the only sound. Then I took a look at the two dead men and saw that they were Jeff Smallwood and Ed Fairchild.

I got hold of their broncs and then I tugged and heaved and grunted until I got them both on their stomachs across their saddles. Then I ran a lariat from their wrists underneath the broncs' bellies and tied the other end to their ankles. They would pack good now.

Then I told Sandy she could ride double with either of the dead men she chose.

She came up close to me now and put her good hand on my arm. "Are you really taking me in, Slow?" she asked.

"You're one of them, aren't you? You're the kingpin, aren't you?"

"Kingpin?" she said, her eyes going wide like in innocence. "What are you talking about?"

"You were the brains behind this," I said, trying not to pay any attention to what I felt inside me. "Fairchild wasn't smart enough for it and neither was Smallwood or Landers. You got away with it because you're a woman and who would suspect a woman of a thing like this? You just drifted through the mountains, on the edges of Frying Pan, and when no one looked, you hustled three-four head of stock away from Frying Pan and then your pals picked them up. Isn't that how it was, Sandy?"

"Slow," she said, putting herself close to me, telling me by her movement that I could hold her if I wanted to, but I kept my hands and arms at my sides. "Does anyone beside you know this, Slow?"

"They will when I tell them."

"You'll only ruin both our lives, Slow," she went on, still crying, still holding tight to me. "If I go to the pen, I'll be old and ugly when I come out. You'll be old, too, Slow. Where's the sense in that? I'll be good to you if you take me to your ranch. You'll never regret it. I was foolish and I went wrong because I didn't have a man to love and I got hopeless and bitter. But now it's different. I love you. Say you'll leave me out of it and that you'll take me home with you. Please say it, Slow. Please don't ruin both our lives."

I knew she was telling the truth there. The pen would ruin her. And me, I'd never find any one else. But I remembered those other things, I remembered those things a little too strong.

I said, "Get on a horse, Sandy. You've got a date with the sheriff."

I RODE back to Cerro Alto and I told Wade Wyatt this time I was quitting for good and not to try to talk me out of it. He took one look of my face and then he wrote out a check with a bonus added to it.

"Where you going now, Slow?" he asked.

I folded the check and stuffed it in my shirt pocket. "I'm going out and get drunk," I said.

Wyatt laughed a little. "Kind of celebrating the end of your job?"

"Sure," I said, my mind thinking of another thing. "Something like that . . ." ●

A son needs a father
almost as badly as a
father needs his son

The man could draw

SUNDOWN

HE RODE into town late that day, a long lean man with a gaunt face and a thin slash of a mouth. Trail dust hung on him like a bad past, as he stood at the hitch. When he took off his broad-rimmed hat to the Widow Green, passing down Main street in a buckboard, you could see the gray in his hair. At that, he couldn't have been more than thirty-seven.

There was a way he had, when he crossed the boardwalk to the Ace in the Hole, that made a man think twice about him. It was as though he'd been around from hell to breakfast and seen all there was to see—and was tired, thinking about it.

He spread the batwings and went inside, and up to the bar. He put down money and the bartender brought him a drink. He didn't take any notice of the local boys who looked him over, from his gray eyes to the double hardware in his low holsters. But they didn't look long, for the gray eyes weren't friendly. There were no questions asked. He looked like a killer, and they let him alone.

But he'd come to stay. He took a room over the bar. The next morning the townsfolk saw him sitting out front under the tin awning, his chair tilted against the wall. When the swamper came out with his broom and bucket, the stranger got up quietly and went inside.

A little later he came out of the Ace in the Hole and walked down Main street to Fred's hash house, and had breakfast. Sally Teal flashed him a smile as he came in, and after she gave him his order of ham and eggs, she tried every which way to get him to talk. Sally was seventeen and friendly, and downright easy to look at. But she got nowhere with the tall gray-eyed stranger.

He came out of Fred's place and walked slowly over to Peavy's Mercantile, across the street. The bell over the door jangled as he went in, and he walked up to the counter and stood there waiting while the Widow Green took care of Mrs. Pettigrew, who was buying yard goods for a calico dress.

Mrs. Pettigrew counted her change, and holding her bundle, hung around as long as she could. Later, what she had to report sounded queer.

The Widow Green looked at the man from behind the counter, and said, "What can I do for you, Lee?" There was something sad in her eyes, and her voice trembled a little.

The tall man had been staring at her, and now he shifted his feet. He looked around quick at Mrs. Pettigrew, still standing inside the door. "Some paper, Mary," he said in a low voice. "That there brown wrapping paper." He looked embarrassed.

"You never did change, did you Lee?" The widow smiled at him, a faraway smile, and her brown eyes were misty. She was still pretty, although she had a grown boy of eighteen, and had worked hard at Peavy's Mercantile ever since her husband died.

He'd been a quiet man, Green had, and not prone to talk about his wife and son. The Greens had come from Albuquerque some years before. When Bill Green died, Mary had done the best she could. Bringing up a boy and work as she did every day, had been a hard pull.

By ELLIS SLOAN

SHE WAS still giving the stranger that faraway look, and he reddened.

"I reckon a man's born one way or another, and don't change, Mary. How's the boy?" he asked. His eyes dropped, and he looked away.

"Headed for trouble, Lee. That's why I wrote, when I heard you were in Sage City. Carl got his first steady job, working for Shane."

"You mean Copperhead?"

The widow nodded. "You remember they ran him out of Albuquerque. Shane runs this town. There isn't a man here dares to go against him. He fired Carl for laming a palomino. Carl hadn't ridden the horse. They had an argument. Shane knocked Carl down and kicked him in the face." She paused, her brown eyes intent on his.

"Carl is like you, Lee—proud. And he's changed. He's been drinking, and he bought himself a gun. He swears he'll get even with Shane." The widow bit her lip. "Seems like there's no end of trouble, when you're alone." She caught sight of Mrs. Pettigrew and her head came up. "Was there something else I could do for you, Sarah?" she asked tartly.

Sarah Pettigrew tossed her head and turned toward the door. "No thanks, Mary," she slapped out. She gathered herself like a ruffled hen and sailed through the door. There was a smug smile on her face. The town would hear about this!

The town did hear about it. But there wasn't much a gossip like the Pettigrew woman could do to Mary Green, until she had more to get her teeth into. Because everybody liked the widow. If her son Carl hung around the Paradise dance hall nights, with Fancy Dan's floosies, and was talking loud and drinking big at the Ace in the Hole between times—well, they were sorry for the widow, that was all.

But the news that the stranger knew the Widow Green went around like wildfire. There was talk about him, and what he came to town for. And when, later that morning, he went back to his chair outside the Ace in the Hole, the cloud of curiosity hanging over him didn't clear.

For he sat there, his chair tilted against the wall, a broad board on his knees. He'd tacked brown wrapping paper to the board, and with the stub of a pencil in his long lean hand, he was drawing on the paper.

The man could draw. He drew anything and everything that came to his vision; the jerry-made buildings that lined Main street, with their flimsy fronts and the deep shadow of their awnings in the Arizona sun. Horses and their riders at the hitch; the wagons drawn up in front of Peavy's Mercantile.

He drew carefully, with a sort of quiet reverence. He seemed to be lost in what he was doing. When he finished a drawing he tore the paper from the board and started another. Soon there was a pile of brown paper beside him. When folks edged up to see what he was doing, he ignored them.

But he noticed Sally Teal when he went to the hash house for lunch. She was surprised at how sociable the stranger could be. He had a roll of the brown paper under his arm, and he asked her if she'd mind if he drew a picture of her. Sally could have refused, but she didn't. The tall man had a way with women.

IT WAS later that afternoon, when Carl Green tore hell for leather down Main street on a lathered sorrel, and pulled up at the hitch in front of the Ace in the Hole. He got down and went inside. After a while he came out a little red in the eyes, and feeling his liquor. He saw the tall man bending over the board and stopped to look over his shoulder.

"Wasting your time, aren't you stranger?" he commented coolly. "Nothing much worth looking at, here."

"That depends," the tall man replied quietly.

"Hell, you ought to draw something pretty, 'stead of that trash."

The older man looked up at him steadily. The boy was a younger replica of himself, and good looking. He felt tired.

"Something pretty—maybe that shiny pistol you're breaking in, or one of Fan-

cy Dan's girls?"

The kid drew himself up. "Keep talking, stranger," he sneered, "could be you'll come up with something."

"You know son, a man ought to watch his turnings. Once he takes a gun in his hand, it's hard to lay it down. Your ma is looking worried."

The kid's flushed face went white. "You ain't improving, Mister," he said. He glared at the older man and deliberately spat on the drawing. "Get up," he said.

Lee didn't bother. He reached out a long arm and grabbed the boy by the belt and pulled. Carl lost his balance and as he fell forward the tall man's fist connected with his chin. His head snapped back and he sank to the porch and lay still.

Lee got up and looked down at the boy, and shook his head. He bent and picked up the pile of brown paper by the chair. He rummaged through the drawings until he found the one of a girl's head, and he studied it.

"Something pretty," he muttered to himself. He rolled up the drawing and stuffed it in the boy's shirt front, and walked off down the street.

"I had to hit the boy," he explained to Mary Green, later. He stood there silent for a moment, looking at her, and he had the same lost feeling he'd always had without her. Only now it was worse.

"Why did you turn me down, Mary, after the boy—when I came back, I mean?" he asked suddenly. The store was empty except for the man and woman who faced each other across the counter. A clock ticked loudly in the silence.

"A fiddle-footed wanderer, wasting his time drawing pictures," Mary Green said softly. "No, Lee— I had a baby to take care of." She looked at him sadly, and the mist was back in her eyes. "But, well—I guess some things you can't forget."

"What do you remember, Mary?" Lee's face was strained, and there was a look of longing in his eyes.

"Good times, Lee—happy times, together." She shook herself out of her reverie. "What'll happen to Carl, Lee? He's like

[*Turn page*]

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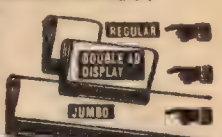

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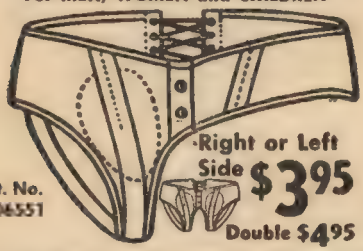

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you! I used to hear about you, helling and gunfighting. I worried."

Lee lost the tender look in her eyes, as the bell over the door jangled, and Sarah Pettigrew walked in. She had a triumphant look on her hatchet face.

"Some more of that there brown wrapping paper, Mrs. Green," Lee said loudly. In a low voice he said. "Don't worry about Carl, Mary. He'll come out all right."

"My sister came in on the noon stage, from Albuquerque," Mrs. Pettigrew crossed to where Mary stood behind the counter. "My, we're having the nicest visit, going over old times and all." Her voice was syrupy. "Alice was telling me all about you and the baby, Carl, I mean. Of course, that was after I came here, but I was so interested—" She pretended to see Lee for the first time. "Oh, excuse me!" she chirruped loudly. "Have I interrupted this gentleman?"

Lee took his roll of brown paper and turned to go. "Lady, you interrupted me something awful," he said smoothly. The bell over the door jangled as he went out.

THAT night, as he sat alone at a table in the Ace in the Hole, his past really caught up with him. He'd expected trouble with Carl after what had happened on the porch that afternoon, and it had bothered him. Where an older man would count odds, the kid disregarded danger. Lee half expected the boy might throw down on him, putting him in a bad spot.

But he'd figured without the malicious gossip of Mrs. Pettigrew, and it had spread around town fast. The kid came into the Ace in the Hole, and he was a changed person. He stood alone at one end of the bar, with his back to Lee, and stared at the bottle in front of him.

Lee realized that someone had been fool enough to tell him the story from Albuquerque. The story of an unmarried mother, and a fiddle-footed cowpoke who drew pictures.

Carl, ready to fight the whole town, would have gone to Mary for the truth. He'd gotten it, and he was floundering, trying to understand. Trying to make up

his mind how he should feel about the man who was his father.

Lee felt helpless rage rising in himself. The smoke and the voices and the stink of liquor faded, and through his mind flicked the barren years, the years without Mary. He'd turned to hot lead and the smell of death, to blot out the loneliness that ate his insides. Because he'd deserted Mary.

And now, with the story all over town, the past had come back to hound her—Lee's past. And there was Carl.

The kid was proud. He'd suffer. And he had a gun.

That was when it happened. The batwings slammed apart and a man walked in. A big man, with pig eyes in a bland face, the flesh solid on him like cold beef on a fat hung steer. He went up to the bar and turned, and his pig eyes lighted when he saw the kid. It was Shane. He guffawed loudly.

The kid straightened and his face went pale. He turned to face Shane, and a taut muscle pulsed at the side of his jaw. Space cleared between him and Shane as two cowhands eased away from the bar. Carl's glance took in the guns in Shane's holsters. He stiffened, waiting.

Shane's pig eyes crawled down the kid to the shiny brass in the new leather. "Seems I heard some talk, a while back," he said. "Concerning you." Shane leaned casually against the bar. "Mighty amusing." He laughed again.

"I warn you, Shane, I won't take it. Not from you." He stood rigid, his eyes blazing. It was written all over him. He was going to throw down. He was going to get killed.

Shane grinned. The kid said in a tight voice, "One more word, Shane."

The room emptied. Except for Lee.

"Copperhead," Lee said softly.

The pig eyes travelled to Lee, and Shane's grin faded.

"Sundown," he muttered. He stiffened.

Lee got up from the table slowly. "You get around, Shane. I ain't been recognized here." He smiled.

Shane's elbows slid off the bar, but he kept his hands wide of the guns in his

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holsters. His lips curled, "I get around," he said. "Now I live here."

Lee's gray glance flicked to Carl, tense down the bar. He looked back at Shane. "You heard some talk, a while back." His voice was gentle. "About my son."

"So?" Shane said, his face frozen.

"Repeat it," Lee prodded, softly.

"Easy, Sundown." The big man grinned. "I ride this town. It's just that the kid and I—"

It was a sneak draw, and the big man was fast. But Lee's long hands flashed back and down, and his guns spoke faster. Shane's lead hammered the wall as he half spun, and he lurched forward. He was dead when he hit the floor.

CARL looked down at Shane, and his face worked with emotion. Lee walked over to where he was standing. He reached over and grabbed the bartender from behind the bar, and ordered a bottle. The man and the boy drank. After a while Lee left the kid and walked out into the darkness.

Morning's sun fought off the jagged peaks of the Rincons, chewed heat into the cool air along Main street, and spat purple shadow beneath the tin awnings. Lee rode his horse from the livery stable past the Ace in the Hole, and reined up in front of Fred's hash house. But when he saw Carl inside talking to Sally Teal, he rode on past to Peavy's Mercantile.

He'd see Mary before he left. A half smile touched the corners of his mouth as the bell jangled after him, and he caught sight of her behind the counter.

"I'll lay in a stock of that there brown paper, Mary," he said—"while I'm about it," he finished lamely.

"You won't need it, Lee," Mary said.

Lee's eyes came up to meet hers and she was smiling softly. She came around the counter and stood close to him.

"It's been a long time, Lee. I didn't know you'd stand by me."

She looked up at him, and she was the same. "Mary," Lee reached out and took her in his arms and held her close. She was saying, over and over, "You're not going anywhere."

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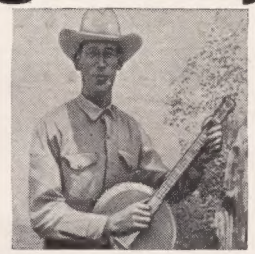

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NOW!
The Greatest
HOSPITALIZATION VALUE EVER OFFERED

Smiling and healthy today — in a Hospital bed tomorrow! Be ready!

Sky-high Hospital bills can wreck your life savings. Insure now!

We pay benefits for as long as you stay in Hospital. NO TIME LIMIT!

PROTECTS YOU and YOUR FAMILY
IN CASE OF **SICKNESS** or **ACCIDENT**..

No Time Limit HOSPITAL PLAN

PAYS BENEFITS FOR **FULL STAY** IN HOSPITAL

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU
IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions!
If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY
For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH, SURGERY, POLIO INCLUDED
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